

REX COLE JR.,
and the
Crystal Clue

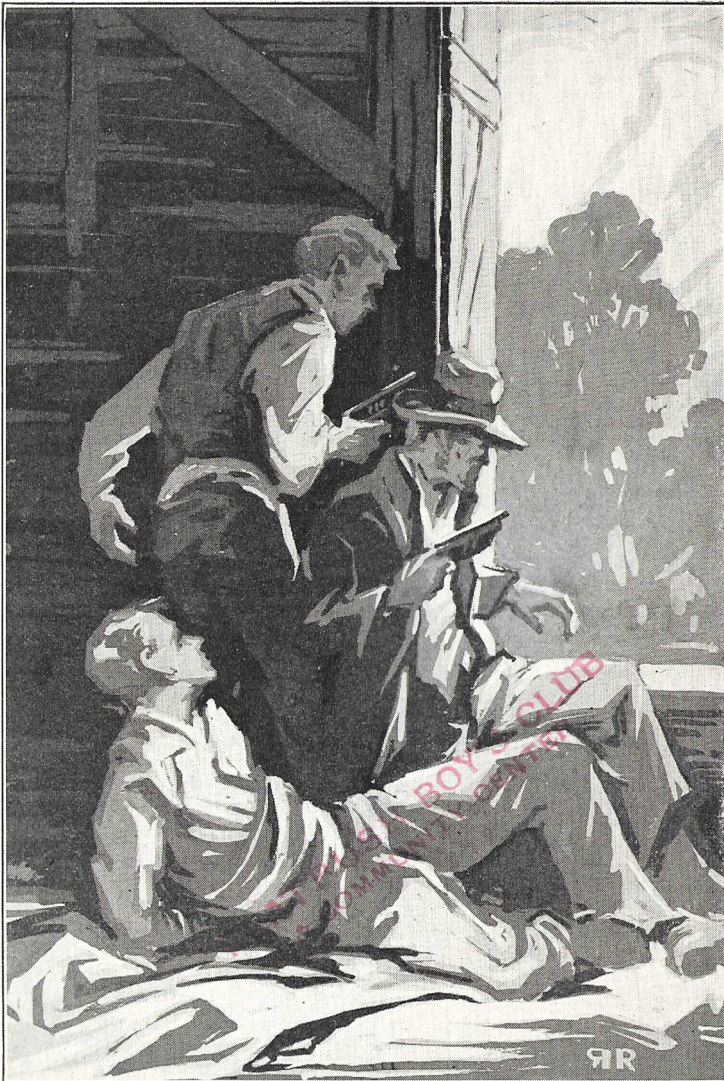
Gordon Chapman





FLATBUSH BOYS CLUB
2246 BEDFORD AVE.
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

N. BRALEY



Rex feared the possibility of a stray bullet striking him as
he lay helpless on the floor.

(Rex Cole, Jr. and the Crystal Clue)

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REX COLE, JUNIOR AND THE CRYSTAL CLUE

BY
GORDON CHAPMAN

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BOYS CLUB
CITY CENTER

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REX COLE, JR. AND THE CRYSTAL CLUE

CHAPTER I

ROBBERY!

IT WAS nine o'clock of a bright October morning. A brisk breeze swept through the open window of Mayor Cole's office in the City Hall of Hilton, Illinois, and fluttered the newspaper that was spread across his desk. The Mayor himself, a striking figure of a man, stared moodily down at the huge black headlines:

BOYDEN HOME BURGLER

Irritation and disgust were writ large upon his handsome countenance, while extreme annoyance was betrayed in his voice as he addressed the youth seated at his side:

"I tell you, Rex, this thing is serious. Seven major thefts within three months, and now this one—the biggest of them all—last

night. You know what that means? Ex-Mayor Cole for me!"

He paused for a moment, but quickly resumed his speech, the words coming hard and fast:

"Not a chance of retaining this office—unless some miracle should happen. Hallowell admits defeat, and if Jim Hallowell is beaten we all might as well throw in the towel and be done. There's no better detective in the country than Jim. I'm beginning to believe what the papers have been saying ever since the first of these thefts: that some diabolical Master Mind is at work in this city. And yet I know in my heart that such a thing or such a man exists only in story books."

He threw up his hands in a gesture of dismay, and lapsed into a grim silence, waiting for the boy to speak.

Rex, Jr.—whom his friends called Young King Cole—was a personable lad. The resemblance to his parent was more than marked. They were almost one in appearance, save for the more stolid carriage and iron gray hair of the older man. Rex was lithe and athletic in build, and his head was haloed by a mass of chestnut brown locks. Otherwise they

were alike: the same steely, blue gray eyes, the same sharply chiseled nose, and the same firm lipped mouth set well above a broad, square chin. Both stood more than six feet: fine, upstanding figures typical of healthy American manhood.

Young King Cole had been graduated the preceding year from Hilton High. In preference to a college career, he had elected to remain with his father, acting as a sort of confidential secretary, picking up here and there odd bits of information that were of great use to him in his chosen field—the study of crime and criminals from an impartial, humanized view point. “I can learn as much from you, Dad, as I might be able to learn at school,” he had said, and the Mayor knew that he spoke the truth. There was something about Rex that responded keenly to the press of social problems with which the citizens of America are struggling constantly. He hated the existence of that great underworld which would terrorize the nation as long as it was permitted to remain unmolested, continually evasive of prosecution: Only by attacking this mushroom growth at its source of nourishment—the hundreds of human beings who

were drawn each year into its tangled by-ways—could it be hindered from expanding, and Rex had come to realize this, as had his father before him. No laws, no matter how strong, could accomplish the great task of erasing crime and corruption from the earth. Human approach, and study alone would solve this problem.

Mayor Cole, who had served two terms in office and was approaching a possible third, had fought masterfully the avalanche of crime that had swamped Hilton. With great sweeps of his hand he had exterminated the vermin of the underworld, until Hilton had risen and thrived beyond his fairest hopes. He loved this little city. He had worked and slaved for it with all the skill and strength at his command. Then, like a bolt from the blue, had come this series of thefts to cloud his vision and practically undo all his efforts. Each one of these crimes had occurred within the home of some wealthy citizen, and it was to them the Mayor had looked for support. The rich moulded public opinion, and public opinion determined the destiny of political careers. Certainly things could not have been worse, with election time a scant month away.

Little wonder that the lines in the Mayor's face deepened as he waited for his son to speak.

"Dad," the boy began, speaking carefully and choosing his words with great deliberation, "there's no such thing as a 'master mind' as far as crime is concerned. Every crook has his weakness, as you often pointed out to me when you were practicing law, but it's not always possible to discover this weakness by using old fashioned methods. This is a day of organized, educated crime, and it takes organized, educated methods to . . ."

But here the Mayor interrupted him.

"I know, my boy, I know, you and I have been through all that before, and Hallowell . . ."

"Hallowell's a boob," the boy blurted. "He goes around with his club and expects the criminal to come up and get hit on the head, just like that. I don't really mean he's a boob, Dad, and there's no finer man in Hilton, but he's not going about this thing in the proper way."

Rex stopped as though he were ashamed of this outburst. However, his father appeared almost pleased.

“What do you think he should do?” he asked.

“I don’t think he should do anything, that is, other than what he has been doing, but I think you should seek additional aid, and,” here the lad hesitated, “and I’m the one who’s going to help.”

The Mayor jumped to his feet.

“Are you mad, boy!” he cried. “Do you think for one moment that I want any son of mine mixed up in this sort of thing? I should say not.”

He stalked around the room in a feigned rage. Secretly he was pleased at his son’s willingness to help. Rex, on the other hand, surmised this, saying:

“I’ll tell you this, Dad: ‘Butterball’ Thomas and I have an idea that some thief—an outsider—has been attracted to Hilton by somebody right here in this city. We have another idea as to what is at the bottom of the whole scheme. These robberies have been too perfect, too flawless, to be the work of a common burglar. Whoever the thief, or thieves, are, they had absolute information upon which to base their plans. Now I want you to ease up and let the two of us work on this

case. We won't take any unnecessary risks, and we'll do our level best to turn up the crooks. We won't interfere with Hallowell. . . ."

Rex broke off as the door to the office swung open and a heavy set, active looking chap in the late thirties entered.

"Morning, yeronner,—morning Rex," he said, and then pointed to the paper. "I see you've seen the news. Another one, and the worst yet! Twenty-five thousand in fine jewels, and Smith reports that there isn't a dime's worth of evidence available. Can't be sure until I check up myself, and I'm on my way there now—Old Si Boyden's place—but I dare say Smith is right. Another clueless crime. Sometimes I think I've been dreaming the past few months. It's all been too perfect to be true. I can't believe that such 'jobs' as these have been are really possible."

He broke off abruptly and commenced to pace the room, chewing upon the fragment of a cigar that was stuck in one corner of his mouth.

The Mayor bent over the newspaper once more. To all appearances he was engrossed in the account of the robbery at Boyden's

home. Actually he saw nothing. His busy mind was examining in minute detail the suggestion that Rex had made a few moments before the Sergeant's entry. Why not give the boy a chance, he thought. After all, the efforts of the police had been as good as wasted. Perhaps Rex, with the ingenuity that he knew the boy possessed, would manage to run something to ground that would be of use to the police force. That was all that they needed; some clue to use as a basis for their operations. Then, too, it would be invaluable training for the lad. He would learn to separate the wheat from the chaff, the dross from the gold. Even if he failed to disclose something of importance, he would still have gained in experience. The possibilities of danger seemed small, and then, Rex could take care of himself. He wasn't a child any more.

Thus the Mayor cogitated upon the problem, and it was not long before he had decided to give his son a chance. He turned to Hallowell who had been standing impatiently by the window.

"Jim," the Mayor called. "Come over

here and have a seat. I want to discuss a suggestion of Rex's with you."

Rex pricked up his ears. He had been thinking some himself, and the more thought he had given the matter, the more he was convinced that he could be of real assistance to his father. Now he was sure that the Mayor would give him a chance, and he waited anxiously for the discussion that was to take place.

"First of all," the Mayor began, "we'll admit the superiority of these criminals, whoever they are. For all we know, it might be only one man. But one, two, or twenty of them, it makes no difference. They have us licked. Now the fault, Jim, may not lie in any one direction. Nobody can say that you, or I, or anyone else has been shirking his duty. The trouble is that we've been handling these things the same way that we would handle any other case, and that is really the big mistake. Now Rex, here, has an idea that he may be able to help us out of this hole we're in. All he wants to do is to nose around a bit, and see whether or not there's anything that might have been overlooked. This affair

at Boyden's should prove a good beginning for him, for it's fresh and he can start from scratch just like you and your men. What do you think?"

Hallowell didn't answer for a moment. Evidently he wasn't sure as to whether he liked this idea or not. After all, no man can be expected to hail such a suggestion as this with enthusiasm. Jim Hallowell had devoted a life time to the apprehension of crooks. He wasn't one who relished the thought of a mere youth stepping in and showing him how to work. Still, he was a just man and realized that the Mayor was only trying to help him.

"I don't know how it will work out," he said, "although I have no definite objection. Rex is a good lad, and a bright one, but this is a man sized job that calls for experience and a fine understanding of the ground to be covered. In books it's O.K. to have a rank amateur step in and do mental wonders, but you don't find that this will hold true in real life."

"Then," said the Mayor, "you feel that Rex's lack of experience will spoil his chances? Well, I'm sorry that I can't agree with you, Jim. He may not have the experience, but

this is one of those times when experience doesn't mean a thing. In fact, I think that his fresh, unbiased point of view is just the thing we need. With you handling the police detail, and Rex doing a little amateur sleuthing, we ought to have some results in no time."

Perhaps the Mayor was a bit more optimistic than the situation justified, but he wanted to win Hallowell over to his way of thinking, for if Rex was to take a real part in the investigation he would need the Sergeant's active co-operation. Working together, they would be more likely to succeed.

Hallowell had risen from his chair and was once more pacing the length of the office. Clouds of thick, blue smoke escaped from his lips, as he drew lustily on the fresh cigar which he had lighted. At length he halted before his superior, a smile on his face.

"I guess there won't be any harm in giving Rex a trial," he said, winking at the boy who had been silent throughout the conversation. Mayor Cole appeared pleased. Now that he had definitely decided that Rex was to have his wish, he was more than enthusiastic about it. All traces of the doubt that had first led him to refuse his son had now vanished. At

this point Rex raised the question of his chum "Butterball" Thomas. The Mayor had forgotten all about the collaboration that Rex had hinted at when the subject was first mentioned. Now he looked at Hallowell.

"Rex thinks that he'd need young Thomas to work with him."

The Sergeant threw up his hands, and laughed. "That balloon," he cried, "he'll come in handy if we ever have any crooks to hold down for a while. With that weight on them, they'd be more secure than they could be in the 'coop.' But bring him on, if you want to. The more the merrier, as they say. This looks like a regular picnic for someone. Let's hope it's not the birds that we're after."

"But now," he added, "it's high time that we were on the job. Where's this young elephant, Rex?"

"I called him this morning and told him to drop around, if he could," the boy replied, "and he ought to be here . . ."

A tremendous crash cut short his words. It echoed down the long corridor beyond the Mayor's office. After the tumult had ceased, someone could be heard shouting at someone else. The Mayor and Hallowell had started at

the sound of the crash, but Rex only smiled.

“That’s him now, I’ll bet. And smashing something as usual. Wonder what it was this time?”

The two Coles and Hallowell filed out of the office and into the corridor.

CHAPTER II

ENTER "BUTTERBALL"

A LUDICROUS spectacle greeted the Mayor and Jim Hallowell as, together with Rex, they filed into the long corridor that bordered the office.

Close by the entrance to the elevator shaft a little, bewhiskered man clad in blue denim overalls was directing a running stream of highly picturesque language at a young lad whose giant-like physique towered above him:

"You—you big, over grown dray horse," the little man was crying, "why don'tcha look where you're goin', huh? What do you think them there bee-yu-tee-ful plants is for, anyway?" He jumped up and down in his excitement, waving a puny fist in the boy's face. "I'll have you locked up for this. Doggonit. Five years, day in and day out, have I watered an' nursed that plant, just for some clumsy lout to come along an' ruin it."

"Butterball," for of course it was he, stood

in abject silence. In one hand he clutched the stalk of a huge rubber plant, the roots dangling against his trousers legs. About him on the floor spread the remains of the urn in which the plant had been standing, while the soft earth that had filled the urn was strewn at random over the stone of the corridor. He drew a large handkerchief from his pocket with the other hand and mopped at his face.

The Mayor stepped up to the little man who was still numbering his grievances.

"All right, Joe," he said, "I'll attend to this young vandal immediately. I'll make him get you a new plant. How's that?"

The little fellow spun around.

"Pardon, yeronner, I didn't know you was standing there. O' course you know how I likes these plants, an' when someone busts one of them up, like that young feller there, well, I kinda forgets myself. Still (he cast a baleful eye at "Butterball"), I suppose he can buy us a new one, but it won't be like Tillie—I guess it sounds funny callin' a plant Tillie—I named it after my first wife, though." He grinned sheepishly, and then started off down the corridor.

"Don't mind Joe," the Mayor said to But-

terball, "he'll get over the loss of his 'Tillie,' but how the dickens did you come to knock it over? I know your reputation, young man, but I didn't think it extended to rubber plants."

"Well, you see, I tripped coming out of the elevator—the car stopped below the landing—and I grabbed hold of the first thing that came my way to keep from falling. It turned out to be this plant, and the whole works went over before I could stop it."

Rex had been standing with Hallowell, both listening to the conversation. Now he doubled up with laughter, while a broad smile cracked Hallowell's grim features.

"I'm glad you—er— stumbled in," the Mayor was saying, "because we were just talking something over in which Rex says you are interested. Come into my office, and we'll go over the whole matter." The four entered the Mayor's private sanctum and went briskly to business. The incident of the ruined plant was soon forgotten in the press of the events that now occupied their minds.

"Jim," the Mayor began, "I was starting to tell you something before we left here, and I'll finish it now. Briefly it's this: Rex has

been telling me that he and Young Thomas have a 'hunch' about these robberies, and they want a chance to root around and see whether or not they can find any valuable information that might help us to put our hands on the robbers."

"Naturally anything they do (for I'm going to ask you to take them with you) must not interfere in any way with your own operations. I don't think that either of them will want to get in your way, and I'm sure that if they do anything that you feel shouldn't be done, they will gladly desist."

"This is no reflection on you at all, Jim," he continued. "It only amounts to the old adage that sometimes a few heads are better than one. There's also the saying, 'Too many cooks may spoil the broth,' but I hope it won't apply in this case." He paused, awaiting some comment from the burly police officer.

Hallowell appeared thoughtful. He took a few rapid strides about the room.

"Yeronner, I am only too glad to take these boys with me in this investigation, for whether they should prove of help or not it will be a new experience for them, and experience is

the real key to truth, if you ask me." He spoke slowly, meditating upon each word.

"I'm afraid, however," he continued, "that even our combined efforts will not amount to a hill of beans, because Smith, my best man, has already informed me that there is little for us to sink our teeth into; in fact, he so much as said that there is not a trace to be found as to the method used to enter the house, regardless of how they opened up Boyden's safe. The house is completely protected by an elaborate burglar alarm. When a crook can break into a place under such circumstances, it means that we detectives are going to find the going mighty rough. You might think it was an inside job, but it's almost certain that it was not. Boyden's servants are all darkies, and no darky committed this crime."

Rex and Butterball had been listening attentively to the Sergeant's talk. A peculiar electric glance flashed between the two boys, but they said nothing.

The Mayor, too, had carefully followed Hallowell in his remarks concerning the crime. His brows were knit in deep thought as he weighed the perplexing situation. Still,

if the boys thought they could unearth something, it was barely possible that their fresh young minds would serve them in good stead. Perhaps there had been something that the thorough going Hallowell had failed to see—some peculiar mental phase that would appear more important to the boys than to this hard, two fisted man.

“In as much as you have no objections, Jim,” he said, “I’ll leave it up to the boys as to whether they are still keen on the project. We won’t expect any wonders from them, but we’ll give them a chance to wander around a bit and work on that ‘hunch,’ as Rex calls it. What do you say, boys?”

Rex spoke for both of them.

“It’s awfully good of you, Dad, and you too, Sergeant Hallowell, to give us your permission. We don’t have much more than a ‘hunch’ to guide us, but it is so strong that it may prove of real value. We’re not interested particularly in the routine of the thing, and I give you my word that neither of us will interfere or meddle in anything that doesn’t rightly concern us. The only request we have to make is that you allow us to keep our idea to ourselves until the time comes when we can

tell you with some certainty all about it. Just now it would sound so ridiculous that you would only laugh at us, and we couldn't blame you."

Both the Mayor and Hallowell smiled. The obvious determination of these boys was pleasing to both, even though they secretly harbored the notion that it was only the enthusiasm of two lads who were anxious to share in some of the excitement of the chase.

Hallowell turned to the Mayor.

"It's high time we were on our way, yer onner. I'd like to get out there and put the servants through the mill before the whole thing becomes 'cold.' Boyden, too, is probably anxious to see me out there. He's a rich man but the theft of his wife's jewels must sure be bothering him."

He rose, as did the two boys.

"We can take my roadster," offered Rex, and the Sergeant agreed readily. Just as they were about to leave, a clerk put his head in the door, and asked for Sergeant Hallowell. It was a call from Smith, it appeared, and the Sergeant hastened away. He returned in a few moments, and his face seemed grimmer than before:

“They’ve found a nice set of footprints out there, leading from some shrubbery on the outskirts of the estate right up to the library window. They check with the prints that Smith had found on the rug in the library, although that could be expected. It was no inside job, you can bet. Let’s go, boys.” He marched stolidly out the door, followed by Rex and Butterball.

The Mayor watched them go, silently comparing the two youths whose friendship had existed ever since their early days in grade school. His son, tall and slender and lithe as a cat seemed oddly at variance with Butterball and his massive frame. He liked the latter immensely, as did most people, and a smile raised the corners of his mouth as he thought of the damage the big boy had done earlier in the morning.

“I had better see about getting another ‘Tillie’ for Joe,” he thought. “Perhaps I won’t be here much longer, and there’s no time like the present. It would be almost laughable if my last public service for Hilton should prove to be the purchase of a rubber plant for the City Hall.”

CHAPTER III

THE CRYSTAL CLUE

THE drive to the Boyden home took a scant five minutes. When Hallowell and the two boys arrived there, they were greeted by Smith, who conducted them immediately to the library where he had assembled the servants for questioning.

"Here they are, chief," said Smith, indicating the huddled group of scared darkies.

"Good," Hallowell responded. "Let me have them one at a time. I'll take the butler first." He motioned the boys to seats but remained standing himself. Meanwhile Smith led all save Werthan, the butler, out of the room. A moment later he returned, and Hallowell proceeded with his examination.

"Name?" he asked the frightened Negro.

"Yassuh."

"I mean, what is it, man?"

"Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Werthan, suh." The butler recited this mouth filling

list with so doleful an expression that Hallowell was forced to smile.

"Well, Abe, tell us just what you did last night and this morning."

The butler now appeared more at ease. Perhaps he had felt that the police were going to clap him right in jail without even hearing him. He fixed his eyes upon the ceiling, as though his memory was concentrated there, and began his account:

"Las' night, 'bout ten-thirty, Mr. and Miz Boyden went up to their rooms on the second flo'. At 'leven o'clock I went around closin' the windows and lockin' the do's like I always does when the family's home early. 'Bout ten minutes pas' 'leven, I threw the switch what sets the bugler alahm, an' went off to bed. Come seven o'clock this mawnin' I gets up an' goes around to open the house, fust openin' the switch so that ol' alahm won't go off."

"Just a minute, Abe," the Sergeant interrupted, "where is that switch located?"

"Right in the butler's pantry, suh, back in a cupboard."

"All right, Abe, go ahead."

"Well, suh, I comes in this lib'ry, and the fust thing I sees is that there safe busted

plumb open. I saw that the windows was all shut but I didn't stop to open one of them. I just run up stairs fast as I can, and fetched Mr. Boyden. When he saw the safe, he let out a yell 'bout some joolry, an' tol' me to call up the po-lice. Right after that, this gem'mun come around (he pointed to Smith) an' thas all I knows, may the Lawd strike down mah black body."

Hallowell appeared to ponder for a moment, and then said:

"You are sure that that switch was closed when you reached it this morning?"

"Yassuh."

"And you are also sure that no windows were open in here?"

"Yassuh."

"Tell me, Abe, who are the other servants in the house?" asked Hallowell, apparently having satisfied himself about the alarm and windows.

"They's Mary Jane, mah wife, she the cook; then they's Johnson, he the chauffeur; then they's Minnie Brown, she second maid; an' en they's that no good Rastus who take care of the groun's an' do odd jobs. We all have

our quahtahs in the back of the house, over the kitchen."

"I guess that'll be all, Abe, unless—" and he turned to the boys, "anything you'd like to ask, boys?"

Rex, who had been standing at the window through which the entry must have been made, turned to ask the butler a surprising question:

"Mr. Boyden a great smoker, Abe?"

"No, suh, he smoke only a little. No mo' than a seegar after his meals."

Rex signalled that he had nothing further to ask, and Butterball, seated dangerously on a small chair, seemed to be lost in thought. He merely nodded his head, and the darky left the room.

Further questioning of the other servants elicited no new information. They had all been in bed before eleven o'clock. Evidently no sound had disturbed their slumbers.

After the last had left the room, Hollowell grunted something about being as much in the dark as before he had started.

Rex, however, seemed vastly pleased with something, and asked the Sergeant if he

might take a look around the grounds. When the Sergeant shrugged his shoulders as though it made no difference to him the boy walked out of the room, leaving the others to confront Silas Boyden who was then coming downstairs to speak with them.

Boyden was the typical successful business man. His reputation for clean, shrewd dealing had made him one of Hilton's most respected men of affairs. In the prime of life, he had practically retired from active work. His huge business in farm machinery was managed by a competent organization of employees. It was said that he was heavily interested in various financial enterprises but the extent of these was not known. In all, both physically and financially, he was an imposing figure.

The theft of his wife's jewels had angered him, none the less, and he was not loath to vent some of his spleen on Hallowell.

"After all the trouble I took to protect this house," he stormed, "some petty thief walks in as though it were wide open and begging to be burgled."

"No petty thief did this job," Hallowell

assured him. "I've never seen a neater bit of work, although the use of nitro glycerine is out of date. I judge that the crook, or crooks, used that pile of pillows and leather seats to deaden the sound of the explosion." He motioned to a collection of these articles piled in one corner.

"Didn't mind leaving a foot print or two either," he went on to say, showing Boyden and Butterball several muddy tracks leading from the window to the safe and back again. "A lot of good they will be," he added, "except to tell us that the thief entered this room after the rain last night. Must have been after two in the morning, I think, because that's when the rain stopped."

"But," Boyden said, "how did the bounder get in without setting off the alarm?"

"That's what we'd all like to know, Mr. Boyden, and the only way I can figure it out is that there were two of them. One remained in the house all night, before and after the switch was thrown and opened by Werthan. That's how it could have been done but I can't believe it. Why would they go to all the trouble of letting in another man? One was

all that was needed for this job." The Sergeant shook his head and gazed off into space, while Boyden paced the room.

"I suppose you want a statement for your paper," he said finally to Butterball. "Well, I must say that it's a crying shame that such a thing as this should have happened in this city. And think of those others. Why, it's unbelievable that Hilton should suddenly become a haven for such criminals as perpetrated these thefts. I sympathize with Mayor Cole and the police but I must say that some drastic steps will have to be taken." Here he paused, and Butterball, who had been making a pretense of taking notes, thanked him for the statement (which would not appear, if he had anything to say about it).

During the course of this interview, Rex had been going over the grounds that surrounded the house. The section nearest to the library side he left to the last for it was there that he believed any real evidence might be found. He spent perhaps fifteen minutes inspecting the considerable area of lawn that bordered the mansion on four sides, and then directed his search toward the library window. He had barely reached this space when

the sound of wheels scraping over the gravel path behind him caused him to turn about, anxious to ascertain who might be leaving so soon after the Sergeant's interviews with the servants. It was Rastus, the gardener, mounted upon a bicycle. At Rex's hail, he dismounted and walked across the lawn to the boy.

"I'se jes' goin' to the joolry sto'," he answered in reply to Rex's question. "Mist Boyden done give me his watch an' tol' me to bring it down town."

The explanation seemed simple enough so Rex let the man go. Now for this last patch of ground, which he wanted to explore.

First of all there was that object that had been visible from the window. Rex walked over and picked it up. It was the remnant of a partially smoked cigar, and hence Rex's question to the butler. He wondered who had smoked that oddly shaped bit of rolled tobacco.

After thrusting the cigar in a pocket, he continued his search, carefully now, in order to overlook no minute detail. There were, of course, the footprints that Smith had found directly beneath the window where the turf

ended to allow for a small border of low shrubs but these he disregarded. Anyone careless enough to leave such prints was obviously pretty certain that they would never be identified. He knelt in the mud that surrounded the shrubs and carefully studied every inch of space in that spot. Nothing of interest was revealed, and he was disappointed. In every article of crime detection that he had read, there had always been some mention of the terrain traversed by the criminal. This was the most likely place to find clues.

Rex started to rise to his feet. It was his intention to return to the library and join the others. He had hardly moved, however, when something almost imbedded in the mud flashed in the sun. When he shifted his position, the flash was no longer visible, and it was with difficulty that he finally located its source. This proved to be a tiny, pie-shaped sliver of glass. Further search revealed another, and then another stuck fast in the mud. He picked them up gingerly, and studied the fragments as they lay in his hand. Then something clicked in his head. By George! If they were . . .

CHAPTER IV

ROBBERY TO COME

WHEN Rex re-entered the library, Boyden had left, and Hallowell was inspecting the looted safe looking for finger prints. Smith, his right hand man, speaking over the library extension, was ordering the police photographer to come out and "shoot" the foot prints on the rug merely as a matter of form. Butterball still sat in his chair, for all the world like a big, blinking owl. His blonde hair was tousled from the continuous sweep of his hand as he ran his fingers over his head. This indicated deep thought on his part or so he said.

He looked up as Rex strode into the room, and shot his friend a questioning glance. Rex replied by removing the cigar from his pocket. The glass splinters he had already stowed in an old envelope which now reposed in an inside pocket for future reference. The

cigar he held between his fingers, and directed Hallowell's attention to it.

"What do you make of this, Sergeant?" he asked.

The burly man seemed unimpressed.

"Looks like one of Boyden's," he said, motioning to a long ebony box that contained fresh cigars moulded in the peculiar square shape of the one Rex was exhibiting. The boy had noted this too.

"I found it outside," he explained. "Just wondered why it should be there. The lawn is kept spic and span, and it seemed strange to see this thing right out in plain view."

Hallowell shrugged his shoulders.

"The butler told you that Boyden smokes after meals. Probably he threw that one away last night after dinner. He's at breakfast now so it couldn't have been this morning. Someone is always finding things like that in books, Rex, but in real life they never amount to anything."

While this sage speech was being delivered, Butterball had been gazing curiously at the cigar. However, he gave up shortly and once more resumed his attitude of thought.

The Sergeant's dismissal of the cigar led

Rex to withhold the broken glass that he had found. There was no use in annoying Hallowell with more story book clues.

Meanwhile Smith had completed his telephone call, and he and the Sergeant prepared to test the burglar alarm. A careful inspection of the wiring, cleverly concealed behind drapes and moulding, had been made but no break in the system had been discovered. Now Smith repaired to the butler's pantry and soon returned announcing that the switch had been thrown, setting the alarm. Hallowell walked over to the window and gently raised the sash about an inch. Simultaneously with the lifting of the window came a tremendous ringing in the rear of the house. The gong sounded like a four alarm fire signal. Smith hastened back to pull the switch. It was evident that the alarm was in working order.

Another sound would have been heard had it not been for the ringing of the bell. Butterball had jumped at the first clatter of the alarm, and when Butterball jumped, especially in a room crowded with furniture, something was bound to happen. It did. A fine porcelain vase crashed to the floor, scat-

tering itself in a thousand pieces upon the carpet. Nobody noticed it, except the fat lad until the noise of the bell had subsided. Then Hallowell gave a howl.

"I knew it," he cried. "Trust that fellow to cause more trouble. He'd manage to break something in a grave yard."

Butterball looked abashed.

"Nobody except you people saw me do it," he stated. "It won't be missed with all this other stuff about." He stooped to collect the pieces, dumping them in a waste basket, while Rex howled and the Sergeant glowered at him. Mrs. Boyden, a regal, matronly woman of middle age, had entered the room just after the last fragment of vase was removed. Butterball, contrary to his remarks made a few seconds before, confessed his deed and was pardoned with a sweet smile. The sound of the alarm had attracted Mrs. Boyden so she had come to seek an explanation. Following the Sergeant's summary of his experiment, she left the room to join her husband.

There seemed nothing further to be gained by remaining at the house, and Hallowell suggested that they leave. The boys assented, so after giving instructions to Smith to guide

the photographer when he arrived, the three departed. As they were about to step into Rex's car, the latter remembered that he had failed to take his gloves from the library and hastened back. In the hall way beyond the room he halted and picked up the telephone. Softly he called a number, and, when his connection had been established, talked quickly for several seconds. Then he hung up, and, taking his gloves from his coat pocket, rejoined the rest.

The drive back to City Hall was marked by the running comment of Hallowell as he ruminated on the case.

"I tell you, boys," he said at length, "this is a job for men of experience. It's all right to go around picking up cigar butts and such but they never get you anywhere. Work is the only thing that counts. You've got to follow a routine, combing the city for ex-convicts and such. If you find any, sweating the truth out of them is next. This was a good job of safe cracking, and the man who did it is no amateur, which means that you have to find someone with a jail record. That's my job. Sooner or later I'll land my man. I'll admit that I'm almost licked but you can't

expect to get every criminal who operates in a city like Hilton, even though there are very few, thanks to Rex's father."

Rex had been thinking of many things but just here he made a suggestion that startled Hallowell.

"Why don't you wire the authorities in Chicago and find out if there are any crooks absent from that city. They keep a pretty close check on everybody whose faces are in the 'rogues' gallery' and they may know something that will help."

Hallowell admitted that he should have done this before. "You can't think of everything," he mumbled, somewhat embarrassed that this youth had struck upon a vital point that should have been a part of his formula.

"I'll wire to-night," he added, and again took up the thread of his remarks regarding the crime.

Eventually the little car rolled up before City Hall and the Sergeant clambered out, stating his intention of reporting to the Mayor. Rex and Butterball remained in the roadster, each anxious to speak to the other.

"Go ahead, old man, spring it," Rex said to his chum. "I saw you start when I was

showing the Sergeant that cigar, and I wondered what had made you sit up and take notice. Didn't ask you then because you seemed to want to hold in a while. Now you tell me, and then I'll tell you a thing or two."

The large boy shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Let me see that butt again," he asked. Rex promptly withdrew it from his pocket.

"You see," Butterball stated, "this cigar is bone dry. If it was smoked after dinner last night and then flipped out of the library window, it would still be wringing wet from the rain. You know how long it takes for a thing like this to dry out especially after a rain like the one we had last night. No, sir, that cigar was smoked after the rain, and that was after two o'clock this morning. It looks for sure as though our burglar had plenty of time to smoke one of Boyden's good cigars, and that sounds pretty fishy to me."

A bright light shone in Rex's eyes when Butterball had finished his deduction. He thumped the big lad vigorously upon the back.

"Great, Butt, simply great. That makes things look as though our 'hunch' is the real thing." Rex unfolded his own discovery of

the glass splinters, and his idea as to their origin.

"It means only one thing, Butt," he concluded. "That is . . ."

"Another burglary," the fat boy finished for him.

"Yep," Rex shook his head, "I can make a good guess as to where it will take place, judging from our crook's taste for rich men's homes."

"Bauer's," Butterball hazarded. Rex shook his head again. Bauer's wealth was second only to Boyden's, and so far he was the only rich man who had not suffered at the hands of the unknown criminal.

"Y'know," Butterball continued, "there have been seven robberies in homes that were comparatively easy to enter and one in a place that was fully protected. Naturally that last one showed the cunning of the crook or perhaps we had better say, crooks. It seems a cinch, then, that the ninth will have to be even more daring, and that means a theft in the open, in a crowd of people, where it would put the finishing touches on this scheme. Such a thing would prove beyond doubt that no one in Hilton is safe. The

crime wave is an established fact. Just think of the consequences that would follow."

Rex was well aware of these consequences. He dreaded to think of the inevitable outcome, and yet it seemed unlikely that they could do anything to stop the ninth robbery. All they could do would depend upon their quickness in apprehending the crooks after the robbery had taken place, for unless it did take place, they would have no definite clue as to the perpetrators.

"There's been some talk about town," he said, "that Bauer is going to sponsor a big affair for Elsa, his daughter. That's why I'm sure that he will be the next in line. Any party that he gives will be a 'wow', and a crime at his home will put the whole community into a state of mind that would insure Dad's finish. If Dad is powerless to prevent a thing like that, everyone will lose confidence in him. As it stands now, he is powerless because he's working against a force that is able to forestall his every move."

"Bauer's it is," he muttered. "When you think about it, it seems mighty strange. If there is to be a big party, it looks to me as though it were a handmade opportunity. But

we'll never know until later. The only thing to do is—wait."

Butterball agreed. He had been thinking the same thing as Rex. Bauer's home had been closed to guests for many months, almost two years in fact. Why open it now with danger at every turn? It was barely possible that some influence had been brought to bear on the unsuspecting Dutchman which had led him to re-establish the hospitality that had been absent since the death of his wife. Perhaps some insidious person had been working through Elsa, suggesting innocently that it was high time that some gayety were arranged to brighten the gloom that hung like a pall over the drab old home. If he and Rex were right, the power behind the crooks' activities was well able to insinuate itself into the graces of a family like the Bauer's. Yes, each item in their conclusions seemed to point to just such a situation. Well, they must wait until some definite announcement was made public. There was always the chance that no party would take place. Then Mayor Cole might have a fighting chance.

CHAPTER V

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

A WEEK passed, in which Hallowell and his subordinates diligently combed the city for suspicious characters. In reply to his wire to Chicago, information had been received that two notorious cracksmen of the "old school"—one "Shifty" Lee and his companion "Bub" Freeman—were no longer to be found in their usual haunts, and that it was possible they had headed for Hilton, although this was not actually known.

A search among the jewel marts in many distant cities had also been instituted, but to no avail. Not a trace of the missing gems could be found.

Hallowell, when not otherwise occupied, continued to storm around City Hall, breathing bloody murder and assorted woes, while the papers berated him and his associates for failing to uncover the thieves. The Mayor, too, was reminded continually of the probable

fate in store for him, and, although it was still early in the game, the press was giving considerable space to Heeney, an unscrupulous ward leader who had announced his intention of seeking the Mayor's office. At any other time this would have brought a storm of contempt upon his head, but with the "wave" of crime still billowing about the city many voters were giving him serious consideration. He posed as an avenger of public wrongs. It was rumored that he was receiving support from several of the wealthy and influential men of the city but no names had been given, and no definite allegation had been made. Nevertheless this rumor had a decided effect upon those more easily influenced gentry who feared that Hilton was becoming the shelter for vague, though dangerous, criminals.

As for Rex and his chum, their seeming inactivity led the Mayor to believe that they had lost interest in the chase. Of course this was far from the truth, as Rex attempted to explain to his father. The boy trembled at the white and care-stricken face of the Mayor, and one night after Strewth, the butler, had placed their coffee before them, he set to work to relieve the old man's feelings.

"Dad," he said, "I suppose you're convinced that Butterball and I are lying down on the job, especially after all our brave talk. Well, it's not true. We're both as keen as ever, and we mean to get to the bottom of this nasty affair."

Here he leaned toward the older man, and lowered his voice:

"We've been waiting for something, Dad, and I think it's about to break. Butterball does too. I don't want to tell you all about it just yet—it's only a hunch, you know—but I promise you that it won't be long now. We're settled in our own minds that this whole business is more an attack upon Hilton as a city than upon those who were robbed as individuals. I guess you know what I mean, and that's all I can tell you. Please stop worrying, Dad, because something is bound to happen that will give us a chance to straighten everything out neatly with no trouble to you."

The Mayor smiled faintly at the boy's serious expression, but something in those clear gray eyes—so like his own—brought the realization that his real hope rested in this son of his.

"I hope you're right, lad," he said wearily, and both started to rise. At this point Strewth entered with the news that Rex was wanted on the telephone.

It was a call from Butterball, and the young "man mountain" seemed to be in high spirits.

"Say, Rex, did you see the 'Call' tonight?" he sputtered. "No? Well hurry up and look on page five, column six, and you'll get a real thrill. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

He rang off. Rex clashed the receiver on the hook in his haste to read the paper. He swung the sheets out of his father's hands, extracted the section containing page five, and thrust the remainder back. Then, without a word, he flung into a chair and commenced the search for the important news. His eyes raced hurriedly through various paragraphs under the general heading of "Social Affairs in Hilton" until they finally came to rest upon an item that bore the sub-title:

CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Midway down this portion of the column he found what must have been the particular bit of news to which Butterball had referred, and the more he read the more certain he became.

The thrill of the discovery was sufficient to render him completely spellbound. A low whistle escaped his lips unnoticed except by the Mayor who glanced over at him.

What Rex saw was headed:

WILHELM BAUER TO ENTERTAIN

Underneath ran the following legend:

For the first time in several years, dating back to the lamented passing of Mrs. Wilhelm Bauer, the Bauer home will be opened to receive guests. The celebration is in honor of Miss Ilsa Bauer's nineteenth birthday, and will take the form of a masquerade ball to be held on October 17th. Many youthful socialites from both Hilton and Chicago will be present. Each one has been pledged to secrecy as to his or her particular costume. This promises to be one of the most novel entertainments of the season.

That was all there was, but, oh, boy, what it told Rex! There, right before his eyes, was the long awaited clue to the next robbery. It gave him the time and the place. He certainly would be invited. The local invitations must have been sent out today as October

seventeenth was just two weeks away. His would probably be in tomorrow's mail.

Rex reread the paragraph while he waited for Butterball. Eventually that obese lad was ushered in, and the two of them exchanged looks laden with excitement.

"Boy, oh, boy, what a time somebody is going to have," cried Butterball. "If anything happens, it will sweep the city, believe me," and he motioned broadly with a pudgy hand, thereby knocking three books from a table that stood near by. Then he noticed the Mayor, and apologized for his abrupt entry. "Old King Cole" only looked quizzically at the boys and then retired from the room, pleading weariness. Far be it from him to "horn in" on the doings of these youngsters. Evidently they had "struck oil," but he knew that they would tell him in due time.

The balance of the evening the two boys spent in a whispered discussion of the coming affair. Finally, as Butterball was about to leave, Rex said:

"It's too bad that we can't tell Dad or Hallowell about this but they'd want to have the place guarded, and that would probably queer the whole proceedings. No, sir, we've got to

tackle this thing alone, 'Butt,' but I don't think there will be any danger. It isn't that kind of a plot if we're right in what we think to be true."

The big boy nodded. "No cops," he said, "just you and me. We'll both be invited, I guess, and although they will all know me (he indicated his huge frame), it's a cinch that you can get away scot free, even if you do have to take a girl along. We'll all be pledged to secrecy."

"And what's more," he added as he opened the front door, "There will be plenty there from Chicago who aren't so well known here. One or two, anyway!"

CHAPTER VI

THE MASKED BALL

THE ensuing two weeks were marked by continued press agitation centering about the coming election in November. Despite the apparent cessation of criminal activities, there was much doubt as to whether this period of calm would prove lasting. Heeney, now taking a bold stand in his pre-election campaign, promised a quick clean up of all undesirables, although just how he would accomplish this was not stated. Still, many people believed that he could do it, the contrary assertions of Mayor Cole's friends notwithstanding. These loyal partisans pointed out that it was not a question of the man but of the police force whose duty it was to apprehend the criminals. Evidently these particular underworld specimens were more than a match for them, and Heeney would have no better men from whom to draw his force whether he was in earnest or not.

Rex and Butterball waited impatiently for the all important evening of the seventeenth. They alone had an inkling of what might take place, and, what was of greater import, why it might take place.

The seventeenth—a Friday—rolled around eventually bringing in its wake a considerable wave of enthusiasm among the young folks who were to attend the Bauer masked ball. Fortunately for Rex and his pal, they had been asked to come “stag” and hence the problem of what they would do had they been required to escort two young ladies was conveniently solved. Rex wished to remain unknown, if possible, so had planned an elaborate costume that was well calculated to conceal his identity.

Butterball, on the other hand, had no hope of hiding his identity but they both felt that this would not impair his usefulness. After all, the weight of the situation would fall upon Rex’s shoulders for in the event of rapid-fire action the big boy could not be expected to take an active part. He would represent the heavy—very heavy—reserves.

Nine o’clock in the evening came, and a weird procession of grotesque figures began

to file by twos and threes into the Bauer home on "F" Street, far out in what was almost a suburban community. Handsome automobiles maintained a steady stream through the wrought iron gates and thence on up to the door, depositing more and more costumed boys and girls to be quickly swallowed up in the growing throng within.

There were monks, dwarfs, clowns, and dashing Spanish toreadors in profusion; spirited Columbines and little Bo-Peeps giggled at each other; pretty maidens in the dresses of bygone days swept majestically by on the arms of bewigged and lace-laden escorts. Here and there a nondescript "hobo" would ape his more gorgeous friends while strange looking animals leaped and cavorted in mimicry of nature. Mexicans, Chinamen, Indians and Eskimos joined hands in a veritable League of Nations. It was truly a glorious pageant that glittered in the brilliance of the lighted ballroom.

At one end of the scene a platform had been erected from which a competent dance orchestra rendered the latest and most popular tunes.

Because of the secrecy that had been maintained, few of the guests recognized each other. All wore masks that effectively concealed the nose and eyes. Some sported complete false faces. The amount of guessing as to "who was who" was prodigious and afforded much amusement. The very element of secrecy seemed to lend enchantment to the entire affair. Everyone danced and sang, oblivious of the impending disaster.

Toward ten o'clock the music ceased for a brief interlude. The motley assemblage proceeded to storm the long tables that groaned under the weight of huge punch bowls and plates of tiny frosted cookies. An army of flunkies served the thirsty crew who drank and munched on cookies with a will. Afterwards everyone stood or sat around the room in ever changing groups, chattering vigorously and slyly attempting to discern one another's identity.

Some commotion at the entrance to the ballroom caused every eye to turn in that direction. When a complete view was afforded, a great burst of laughter rose up to greet the newcomer, for newcomer it was. The fun-

niest figure imaginable was being pushed into the center of the room. It was Butterball, arriving late.

On his head perched a straggly blonde wig from which snakelike curls hung down to his shoulders. His face was white with powder, save for two spots of brilliant red on his cheeks and a vermillion streak that outlined his mouth. From shoulder to waist he had contrived to squeeze into a tight fitting bodice while from the waist outwards a tremendous ruffled ballet dancer's skirt fluffed, resembling an enormous powder puff. This monstrosity extended down to within a few inches of his knees which were bare and below which clung a pair of ordinary garters. These in turn supported dainty white socks, each of which would have made a sweater for a poodle dog. He had disdained ballet shoes, and wore instead a pair of homely brogans which would have served admirably as kennels for the aforementioned poodle dogs. In all, he was a funny sight. He knew it well.

The youngsters crowded around him, and the fat boy expanded under their persuasive friendliness. When they threatened to keep him away from the punch unless he performed

one of his famous imitations, he quickly consented and forthwith rendered a ballet which he called, "The Dying Duck." It was a riot sending his audience into paroxysms of laughter as he slowly gestured and danced to the tune of Mendelssohn's "Spring Song."

"Whew—that's all," he said finally. He marched over to a convenient spot from which he might survey the throng of dancers that was again crowding the floor. He seemed to locate the person he was seeking. Presently he walked over and passed a grizzled, seamy faced replica of Father Time who was leaning on a wooden scythe near the door. He led the way to glass enclosed conservatory that bordered the ballroom, stopping in the shelter of a palm. The old man soon followed.

"What time is the unmasking, Rex?"

"Sharp at midnight," said the old man, "all the lights will be out for one minute. You stay near the door and I'll watch the windows. Don't let anyone out——"

Here he broke off as a couple wandered in from the dance floor. Motioning to the door, he passed through and the two once more mingled with the dancers.

The remaining hour to midnight sped

quickly. There was dancing interspersed with gay laughter, and happy chattering. Everyone was keyed up for the unmasking. Why, they had even been unable to pick out their young hostess as yet.

Rex had been keeping much to himself but Butterball, in his uproarious costume, was the chief attraction of the moment. He could not evade the fun loving boys and girls who kept after him for a repetition of the "Dying Duck."

As Rex lounged idly near the door, he kept a strict watch upon the several hundred masked faces that glided by him, as though he expected to find some betraying trait in one of them. No one seemed to suggest anything covert or suspicious. He realized how foolish he was and that only time would bring to light the culprit that he felt sure was among them.

Midnight was but a few moments away, and Rex noticed the much harassed Butterball take his stand close to the door. He in turn moved nearer the windows, four of which pierced the far wall and gave on to the lawn outside. He kept within a few feet of the last window in the row, from which position he could command all four. His scythe he placed

upright against the wall for it might hinder him should he be called upon to move quickly.

Suddenly a mellow chime announced midnight, and all the lights in the room flashed off together. Rex tensed. His heart was beating rapidly. His eyes were focused on the windows through which a bluish light poured.

"Oh—oh—my necklace!" the scream rose shrilly above the murmur in the room. Feet scuffled in the center of the floor. A bevy of voices called: "What's wrong?" Rex could not take his eyes from the windows. Was that a shadow? Something was slipping quickly toward the farthest square of blue light. Rex started toward it, only to collide with a soft, feminine body. He freed himself, and raced on—dimly seeing that mysterious shadow framed for a moment in the window now open. A chill blast swept into the room as the boy reached the window. He vaulted in one bound through it just as the lights went on again. He landed in a heap on the soft turf. He was up in an instant and tearing madly after a dim figure that headed for a clump of trees in the rear. Impervious to danger he flung himself into the blackness of the tree clump and: CRACK . . . A stunning

blow landed upon the back of his head. He pitched forward, wildly clawing the air. As unconsciousness overtook him he felt his hand catch upon something, followed by the r-r-r-rip of tearing cloth. Then all was dark.

CHAPTER VII

A NEW CLUE

WHEN Rex "came to," prone upon the smooth lawn beneath the trees, he struggled for a moment to recall the events that had occurred immediately before that powerful blow had felled him. For a few seconds his mind was blank. Then, suddenly, everything rushed in retrospect before his still blurred vision. The scream that had pierced the darkness of the ball room—the dim figure slinking through the window—his own mad pursuit of that figure across the Bauer lawn and into the cluster of trees which now surrounded him—the blow upon his head—the ripping sound that had preceded total insensibility—in short, all that had taken place in those few hurried moments appeared in rapid sequence. Then came the painful thought that he had failed, failed completely. The fugitive had escaped, over the wall that extended all around the Bauer estate.

Shakily he rose to his feet, wondering how much time had elapsed since his abrupt descent into the void of unconsciousness. Only a short while, it seemed, as he gazed at the great house from which a blaze of light and the staccato murmur of voices were dissipating the darkness and shattering the stillness of the night. He wondered what had been stolen, and then recalled that frightened cry "My necklace!" Jewelry again. The full import of this daring robbery dawned upon him. Final, irrevocable, doom for his father. The press and his political opponents would never relent in their merciless disparagement. This was the climax of it all—a gigantic theft in the home of a great man amidst the gayety of that great man's guests. It was awful to think he had failed where he was positive he would win.

Rex began to skirt the lawn in his approach to the house. He might as well return, there was nothing left to do out there. He glanced down at the torn and grimy toga of Father Time that flapped about his knees. What a sight! Oh, well, what did it matter what he looked like. He was going to take his hat and coat and leave immediately. Soon they would all be blaming him for having failed. Rex's

thoughts were as black as the night that surrounded him, cruelly accusing him of his failure.

He cut straight across the lawn until a faint moan, born on the breeze from some nearby place, caused him to halt. He stood stock still, tense in every muscle, trying to locate the person from whom issued this unearthly sound.

"O-o-o-o-oh-ow-ow-ow-ow" it came, at frequent intervals. Rex, after a cautious step forward, discerned a black mass streaked with white not ten feet from him. Part of the mass seemed to move back and forth while the balance remained silent and motionless.

"Who's there?" he hissed, waiting for a reply before moving forward.

"O-o-o-o-oh-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"Who's there, I say?" Rex called softly again.

"'Sme—Butterball—that you, Rex?"

Rex ran forward anxious to know how his friend came to be in such a peculiar position and to ascertain what knowledge, if any, Butterball had gleaned after Rex had vanished.

"Did they get you, too?" he cried. He paused to survey the queer scene that was barely visible in the half-light. The huge

Butterball, ballet skirt and all, was seated upon the ground holding his head between his hands and rocking the entire upper half of his body. Next to him an inanimate something stretched along the turf.

"They?" he groaned. "They? You don't mean they, you mean it." And then he started to explain:

"When I saw you go out the window (I think I was the only one who did) I slipped from the ballroom and ran out the front door. Then I chased across the lawn around to this side of the house and, when I reached just about this spot, I saw something that seemed to be fleeting across the grass. Of course the darkness was deceptive but anyway I took a dive at this figure and—well—there you are." He motioned to the lifeless object at his side. "It was that darned iron dog that Bauer brought from the old country. I hit it with all that I had, and boy, what a smack I got in return. My head feels as though an ostrich had laid a permanent egg on it." He rubbed his head tenderly, and moaned again.

Rex felt the none too modest lump on his own skull.

"I guess we both got what was coming to

us," he said disconsolately, and related his own little skirmish with the unknown maurauder.

"Don't be so disgusted, Rex," his chum advised, "we're not licked yet, I don't think. Let's take a look around first, and then go inside to hear the bad news. Can we get a flashlight?"

"I have one in the car," Rex answered to this last query, and hastened to fetch it, leaving Butterball seated upon the overturned iron dog. In a moment he was back, and the two boys commenced their search in the clump of trees that had been the scene of Rex's downfall. The bright beam of the pocket torch picked its way among the shadows, illuminating each section of the lawn. Suddenly a startled exclamation escaped Rex's lips:

"Look, Butt, over there."

Upon the ground lay a tiny scrap of paper. Butterball hastened to pick it up:

"It's the back of an envelope, Rex," he said, "what do you make of this?"

A crude map or diagram had been sketched on the paper.

The boys fastened eager eyes upon the cryptic drawing. Then Rex cried out in aston-

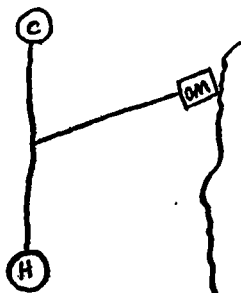
ishment. Meanwhile he thumped Butterball excitedly upon the back:

"We've got it, old boy, we've got it! There's not a moment to lose, either."

Butterball stared at him as though he thought his friend had lost his reason.

"What do you mean, 'We've got it'," he demanded. "So far I guess you're the only one who knows what you're talking about."

"Look at it again, Butt, then listen to me." Rex turned the torch full on the paper.



"The way I figure it, this 'C' can stand for Chicago and nothing else. That would make the 'H' Hilton, and the connecting line the State Road. That branching line would be the Old Mill Road, and that 'O M' must be the Old Mill itself. The wavy line is the stream that runs by it."

"That," he continued dramatically, "is why Hallowell and his men have never traced the crooks because they were never near the city save at the times of the robberies. They simply are using this ramshackle old mill for a hide out. I suppose they have a car, too, and probably some source of supply that is linked up with our first 'hunch.' I must have ripped the crook's pocket when I fell, and this paper dropped.

"Now, what we have to do is to land those men before they make a clean getaway. It's unlikely that they will leave tonight but we're going to go out there and forestall any chance of a sudden departure. First, however, we have to go back to the house, to find out just what happened, and then excuse ourselves. It's about one o'clock now, so let's get a move on and see what we can learn before we leave."

They rushed back to the house, and entered by the front door as quietly as possible. Within the guests were huddled in a group in the ballroom while a patrolman was taking their names. Some comment was caused by the entrance of the two boys but Rex proceeded to tell the story of their recent adventures as though they had merely been acci-

dental. That is to say, he explained that he and Butterball had noticed someone leaving via the window and had given chase only to be assaulted and rendered unconscious. He forbore telling of the nature of the assault that had been administered to his friend. This was no time for laughter, and he was anxious to be done and on the road so that as little time as possible should elapse between the departure of the crooks and their own start in pursuit.

Rex and Butterball became immediate heroes in the eyes of those present. People looked at them with wonder but no one had the faintest notion that they had actually predicted the crime. Of course, Rex said nothing about the scrap of paper. That they would hold until later.

Mr. Bauer himself was on the scene. He was a robust Teuton who breathed prosperity and good nature. At this particular time his humor was sorely stressed for, as the boys soon learned, it was his daughter Ilsa who had been the object of the recent theft. Her necklace of emeralds, a surprise birthday gift, had been snatched from her throat. No one had known that the lovely, dark haired, Egyptian

Princess, was really Ilsa Bauer wearing a brunette wig and with tan powder darkening the fairness of her skin. She stood close to her father now, a blonde child with strange streaks upon her face where the tears had washed away the makeup. Everyone was expressing his regrets that so unfortunate an event had come to mar what would have otherwise been a perfect evening.

The policeman finally obtained the list of guests present and a check was made with the list of invitations. Each name tallied, and it was announced that all were at liberty to go. The policeman, who had called headquarters for a plain clothes officer, took up his post at the entrance to the ballroom to await his superior who had said he would investigate very thoroughly as this was the ninth robbery and it would give the town a bad name if the culprit were not caught.

The guests took their leave as quietly as possible. Rex was one of the first to go, after Mr. Bauer had consoled the boy for having suffered at the hands of the desperado who had stolen his daughter's necklace. Bauer wished the boy, and his chum, of course, to remain a little while longer but Rex tactfully

hinted that he would rather go home to rest after his experience in the garden. Butterball merely echoed this polite refusal.

Soon both boys were seated in Rex's little car rolling out of the driveway toward the State Road where they hoped to get some valuable information.

"It's about a mile to the highway," said Rex, "then about ten miles to the Mill Road. From there it's another five miles or so to the mill. I suppose we really ought to wake up Hallowell and take him along but our plan won't require his help—just yet." He wished they could do all of it without police aid but as they were not at all sure the best thing to do was some investigation and as a last resort get outside assistance.

They drove the mile to the broad State Highway in silence. Then Rex halted the car. He thought for a few seconds.

"From now on I'm going to drive like the wind," he said, "so let's settle the details right now."

"When we get close to the mill, I'll park and leave you in the car." Here Butterball started to protest but Rex silenced him with a gesture of his hand.

"You have to stay in the car in case we need help," he explained. "I'll walk to the mill, and see what is going on within it, also how many of them there are. Then, too, I'll try to locate their automobile and put it out of commission. After that, we'll return to Hilton for re-inforcements. If something should happen to me, that is if I don't get back to the car within half an hour, you tear back to Hilton and bring out Jim Hallowell and as many others as you think might be needed. I wish we could do it alone but perhaps not. There can't be much danger because this isn't a murderous crew—or at least let's hope not. Well . . ."

With the grinding of gears the little car leaped forward, and from that time on Rex held true to his word. They traveled like the wind—if not faster.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE OLD MILL

THE tiny car sped swiftly along under the skillful guidance of the determined boy. At that early morning hour there was scarcely anyone to challenge their right to the road. Occasionally they whizzed by a milk truck, or passed a lone touring car trundling along the highway. Neither of the boys spoke, for Rex was intent upon the manipulation of the car and Butterball, sunk deep in the unholstery, was satisfied to watch the night shadows unfold in an endless blur. There were few road lamps along the way but the full strength of the headlights unerringly picked out the limits of the black ribbon that stretched before them.

Thus they flew along until the speedometer dial showed that they had traveled nine miles. Then Rex slackened his pace, calling to Butterball to keep a watchful eye for the turn-off that would place them on the Old Mill Road. Half a mile further, and then the headlights

revealed a white sign post indicating the intersection. Butterball nudged Rex who nodded as he swung the wheel about and applied the brakes gently. In a moment they were scudding along again now but a scant five miles from the Old Mill.

The going was a bit slow on this road for it lacked the smooth macademized paving of the State Highway. Numerous ruts and holes wrenched at the wheels, throwing the light auto from side to side. Rex's knuckles shown white under the skin as he clutched the wheel firmly to avoid losing control.

When another four miles had been indicated on the speedometer, the car began to climb a long grade on the other side of which would be the dilapidated mill. Rex retarded the speed of the machine until they were barely crawling. Then he switched off the lights and made the rest of the ascent in total darkness.

"Don't want to let anyone know that we're coming," he explained, "I'll stop at the top of the hill and walk the rest. It's only about a quarter of a mile." Butterball smiled. "Rex certainly thinks of everything," he thought as he surveyed the grim, set expres-

sion that made an iron mask of his friend's features.

Once at the top of the hill, Rex drew the car into a shallow ditch, clambering out of his seat. Below them bulked the vague outline of the mill while the sound of water rushing through the mill race drifted to their ears. Somewhere an owl hooted, and strange night sounds arose from the woods that surrounded the mill. It was certainly a lonely spot, and both boys shivered a bit. In their haste both had forgotten that they were still garbed in the costumes worn during the earlier part of the evening. Now they regretted them for they afforded scant protection against the chill breeze that swept over the hilltop.

"I'll make tracks for the mill, Butt," Rex said between shivers, "you stay with the car, of course, and—let me see—it's a quarter of two now. If I'm not back by two-thirty, you drive in to town and get Hallowell. It probably won't be necessary, because I don't intend to tackle anybody single handed. Well . . . s'long." He vanished into the night.

Butterball made himself as comfortable as possible in the front seat of the roadster. He remembered that Rex usually had a blanket

in the rumble, and his inspection was rewarded. With the blanket wrapped snugly about him, he rested his head upon one arm and tried to paint a mental picture of the ovation that would be accorded them after they had captured the criminals. He thought, too, of Rex alone in that Old Mill and secretly wished that he had gone along instead of allowing his chum to play the lone wolf but realized that on account of his size and clumsiness he would be a hindrance rather than a help if speed were necessary, and, besides that, if Rex were in danger he would be helping by getting aid to him and he could drive as fast as Rex even if he could not run.

Rex had started his nocturnal prowling by way of the soft turf that fringed the road. He made no sound, save for the occasional snapping of a twig broken underfoot. His heart was beating fast, though he knew not the slightest twinge of fear. Rather was it that the thrill of the adventure was warming his blood.

"I'd like to lay my hands on the chap who left his calling card on my head," he thought, and his fists clenched in anger.

Presently the mill loomed large in his path.

He slipped off the road edge and carefully picked his way through the tangled underbrush that caught and tore his toga. To prevent further ripping of this flimsy garment, he managed to fasten the loose ends securely to his waist. Then the march was resumed.

At one far distant time, before the advent of electric power that had concentrated all industry closer to the city, this mill had been a pretentious edifice. It was composed of a large, red brick rectangle about two stories high with an adjoining wing of wood built over the stream and housing the mill wheel. The front of the rectangle faced the road and came to an abrupt end near the bridge that linked the two banks of the stream. From the road it ran back about two hundred feet almost to the end of the clearing that had been made for it. Between the actual extremity of the building and this clearing stood two shacks that had been used for a forge and a tool house. Both of these, as well as the mill itself, were in a disreputable state of repair. Hardly a pane of glass could be found in any of the windows, while within the buildings the floors were all rotted and worm eaten. Should anyone come close enough to the mill, they would

be greeted by a musty, nauseating odor. Not a very attractive spot at all, as Rex silently admitted, drawing near to the two shanties in the rear.

He had selected these as the scene of his first action, for they were the logical hiding places of so large an object as an automobile. The many times that he had passed the Old Mill in the daylight, and the vivid mental picture that had resulted, now stood him in good stead, for it was difficult to discern the exact state of affairs in the dark. The smaller of the shacks he passed by, and crept near to the larger. His nimble fingers felt for the rickety door, which swung open at a touch with hardly a murmur. Someone had oiled the hinges, and recently.

He slipped in, and came in contact with a huge pile of tarpaulin that evidently was covering some hard substance underneath its greasy folds. Rex flung back the tarpaulin, and felt metal—warm metal—beneath his fingertips. He was touching the hood of an automobile. Its engine was not yet cold.

Deftly he unhooked the clamps, and raised a section of the hood disclosing the motor. He searched gropingly for the distributor, and

finally located it. A twist, and the cap came off in his hands. Another twist, and he had dislodged the tiny rotor without which the car could not be started. He then replaced the cap and lowered the hood. That little job was done. Nobody would leave in that car.

He hastened outside, softly closing the door after him. Somewhere below him the water was flowing by, gurgling as it rushed over the race. With a quick cast, he flung the rotor out, and a moment later heard a faint "plash" as it fell in the stream. Now for the mill itself.

Rex's heart beat a mad tattoo against his ribs. Why not call it a night, and return with Hallowell in the morning? But his curiosity was aroused. It wouldn't hurt to take a brief look around at the place. Anyone who might be there would be asleep, and he could always run before it was too late should he arouse its furtive inhabitants. Casting good sense and logic to the winds, he turned toward the silent building. As he made his way along the side wall farthest from the stream, he reflected that there was still at least twenty minutes left before Butterball would become anxious.

He had chosen this side of the mill because

he recalled a number of broken windows that were flush with the ground and gave into the basement. This part would undoubtedly be empty, and if he could enter here for a minute he might be able to hear the movements of anyone above him, should anyone be awake. He realized that it would be possible for the thieves to maintain a light screened from outside view. Perhaps, after all, they had not yet gone to bed. Cautiously he groped along the wall until he reached one of the windows. It was absolutely free of glass, and he carefully inserted his head. Unfortunately the darkness was impenetrable, and the nasty odor of the place made him flinch. He heard a rat scurry about the floor within. The desire to leave was strong but that to remain was even stronger. There could be little harm attached to a short visit if he were careful to make no noise. He drew himself through the window and dropped to the floor below. For a moment he remained poised in the position in which he had landed, straining his ears for some telltale sound but none was forthcoming. He slid along the floor, until his foot caught on what he decided was the bottom rung of a ladder. This was proven by moving

one hand, which, thrust upward, came to rest upon another rung. There were more rungs between his hand and foot.

Slowly he began to mount, reaching up with his free hand to ascertain whether or not any obstacle was likely to come in contact with his head. There was nothing there save a black void. He advanced, rung by rung, until his outstretched hand felt the edge of a hole cut in the floor above him. Soon his head was on a level with the flooring, and he grasped the rough edge with both hands. In vain he tried to pierce the darkness, but, if it were black outside, it was blacker in this silent, dungeon like inclosure. His zest for adventure finally dissolved, and he determined to go back. The foolhardiness of his course swept full upon him. There would be plenty of time to come back later with an armed force and root out the culprits who must be in some part of the building. He placed one foot down again upon a lower rung and then . . . Crash! . . . the rotted wood gave way from the sides of the ladder, and he was left suspended by his hands.

On the instant there was a movement behind his head and a dazzling streak of light cut

the gloom. The sound of rushing feet shattered the stillness that had followed the clatter of the falling wood. Rex had but one thing to do—he dropped the fifteen feet or so to the cellar. But he was too late. Another body, crying “Hey Bub, . . . down the hole,” hurtled after him and landed with a smashing impact upon him as he lay upon the stone floor. Huge hairy hands clutched at his body. He twisted and squirmed, striking out lustily with his hands—raining blows upon an invisible face that breathed hotly next to his own. Somehow he managed to elude those grasping hands for a second and was on his feet. His assailant plunged blindly and caught him by the leg. Down they went again, just as a second figure dropped through the hole.

Rex did not give up so lightly. His doubled fists, swinging in rapid, sweeping blows, fell in quick succession upon a face that he could not see. A howl escaped the owner of that face, and something warm and sticky spread over Rex’s knuckles. Again he was free—and again down, now battling the second opponent who had flashed a torch in order to sight his enemy. Around and around they wrestled, arms and feet flying. The torch had

fallen to the floor and smashed. Rex's face brushed against one of the glass fragments which slashed his head above the eyes. He continued to crash his fists against the face and body of his second foe who clung like a leech to one leg as he grunted at each fresh onslaught of those flailing, hammer like hands. But Rex's fate was sealed, for it was inevitable that the first of the thieves should fling himself upon the game lad and pin his shoulders to the floor. Even then he refused to consider his defeat a certainty, as he sank his teeth deep into the flesh of an arm that was circling his head. A cry of pain followed this action, and the arm was withdrawn. Rex shook his head and was about to resume the attack upon the man who still held his foot when something hard and unyielding crunched upon his skull and for the second time that night he lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE OLD MILL

THE morning sun, streaming through a dirty, cobwebbed window pane, fell full upon Rex's face as he lay stretched upon a pile of filthy rags. He stirred in his sleep, tossed his head from one side to the other, and then opened his eyes. The strange surroundings that greeted his first glance brought the sharp remembrance of the night's harrowing experiences. Ugh! His mouth tasted like the inside of last year's hat. He tried to move an arm from behind his back, only to find it and its companion securely lashed together with wire that cut painfully as he moved. His feet, too, were bound together, and were cold and numb from lack of circulation. A weird, dizzy sensation in the back of his head caused him to close his eyes again, and dazzling pin wheels of light whirled beneath his tight-shut lids. For a few moments he remained motionless, struggling to cast off the drowsiness that was

overtaking him. He wanted to sleep again but there was no time for sleep. He must think, and do it quickly, he realized.

Once more he opened his eyes and looked about the partitioned enclosure that made a narrow chamber of one corner of the mill. He could tell from a trap cut in the floor that he was in the room that he had been inspecting when the ladder had fallen apart and left him suspended in air. Slowly his eyes traveled about this unlovely space, and came to rest finally upon the two other occupants of the mill. They lay, side by side, upon a pile of rags similar to his own. Both were fully clad—in fact they looked as though they had not been out of their clothes for several years. From one escaped a prodigious snore. Rex regarded him closely, for he lay nearer to the boy and was totally visible, whereas the second was partially screened from view by a dirty grey blanket drawn close about his shoulders and neck.

The man at whom Rex was gazing was perhaps forty years of age. A mat of towshed hair, partly grey, topped his head and straggled across his narrow forehead. Bushy eyebrows shaded eyes shut in sleep, while a putty-

like nose spread down and flattened above a thin-lipped, twisted mouth. The flabby cheeks and pugnacious jaw were covered with a heavy stubble that failed to hide a livid scar extending almost the entire length of one side of his face. Occasionally the twisted mouth would open to emit a snore, followed by a peculiar whistling sound as the air was expelled.

Below this ugly, treacherous face appeared the husky body of the man—broad shouldered and bulky. He must have weighed two hundred pounds or more. One arm had been bared of its sleeve to the elbow, and a makeshift bandage was wrapped loosely about the wrist. Clotted blood had stiffened most of the flimsy safeguard.

Rex recalled the effective use of his teeth the night before, and was grimly satisfied at the result. He raised his head a bit, the better to observe the second of his assailants. This gentleman had shifted his position a bit, and his face was now disclosed. The most noticeable items upon it were a series of welts and bruises that had swelled the flesh, and that culminated in an enormous “shiner” under the right eye.

"I couldn't have done better if the battle had taken place in broad daylight," thought Rex, and then, remembering his own injuries, added, "Neither could they." He returned to his inspection of the man who was evidently considerably shorter in stature than his fellow thug.

Despite the battered condition of this creature's face, it did not take Rex long to determine that he had seen its counterpart in many a motion picture dealing with crime. Thin, hawk like, the top of the head almost bereft of hair, it was truly a repulsive specimen of human visage. A blackish growth of beard covered much of it and in this it resembled the other. Here, however, the resemblance stopped. No two things could be so utterly different as the facial characteristics of these two men. The smaller might have been likened to a vulture while the larger had the mien of a great English bulldog.

The clothes of the man Rex was then regarding hung upon him like those often seen draped on a scarecrow. His bony knees and shins were visible under the greasy fabric of his trousers. Rex realized that an enormous supply of wiry strength must be concealed in

that thin body for it had been this fellow who had grappled with him when first he fell into the cellar.

“Wonder if these two are the chaps that Hallowell was talking about?” he asked himself. Not that it mattered particularly, for whoever they were, they were certainly the crooks wanted by the police. No mere tramps would have staged a fray such as they did last night.

Rex’s gaze wandered from the sleeping men, and searched the rest of the room.

In the center of the chamber, dangerously near the trap, stood a rickety iron tripod upon which rested a battered boiler, also of iron. This was evidently their stove. Empty tin cans were strewn about its base while upon a straight backed chair reposed a mouldy loaf of bread and a side of bacon together with a tall coffee pot. A wooden box under the chair held further provender in the shape of unopened cans. Next to the chair was another box containing some coal and a few sticks of wood.

As before noted, the partition that extended the width of the mill floor effectively fenced off one corner of the building. The walls that

joined to make two sides of the room had one window each to let in the sunlight and air. One of these windows had a complete pane in it but the other was free of glass and had been crudely covered with a section of old tar paper. The paned window afforded a glimpse of the road below, while the other, had it been uncovered, would have exposed the wooded hillside to view.

Having finished his cursory inspection, Rex began serious consideration of the aspects of his present unfortunate situation. Bound hand and foot, he could not hope to escape. There was nothing to do but cogitate upon the probable fate in store for him. Then he remembered Butterball. Where the deuce was Butterball? Could they have nabbed him too, as he waited in the car? Surely, had he returned to town, he would have been back long ago with help. If he was captured, where had they taken him? Or—or—Rex hated to think of it—perhaps some worse end had overtaken his friend. Fear gripped Rex, not for himself, but for the big, good natured lad who had accompanied him. Oh, if he had only gone back after he had thrown away that distributor rotor.

Rex's thoughts were interrupted by a movement upon the part of the larger of his two captors. This individual had awakened and now was staring at him as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he stretched out a ham-like hand, and shook the fellow next to him:

"Hey, Shifty, look at dis boid," he called.

Shifty ("Shifty" Lee, Rex remembered, was the name of one of the two Chicago cracksters whom Hallowell had mentioned) rubbed his sleepy, puffed up eyes, and sat upright. Then he too stared at Rex.

"Why, it's only a boy," he said. "Can you beat that." Then he felt the bruise under his right eye, "But there's T.N.T. in them dukes of his, believe me."

Rex remained quiet, watching the men as they rose wearily to their feet. So they were surprised to find a youth instead of a man. The makeup on his face must have misled them in the light of a torch or candle. He wondered what they had thought of his costume. But then, one of them must have been at the ball. Suddenly he recalled a nondescript hobo who had pranced gaily about the ballroom. Why, that must have been Shifty, just as he stood before him now.

The big man was speaking.

"Say," he asked the other, "how did he get out here, anyway? He didn't walk those fifteen miles, you can bet your life. If he come out by machine, you better beat it outside and find the car. We don't want nobody finding it before us." He drew a watch—a solid gold watch—from his pocket and glanced at it. "Seven o'clock. Get a move on and hunt up dat car. Drive it in to de woods. Go on, git."

The human "scarecrow" dropped through the hole in the floor.

Rex was elated. So Butterball hadn't been found after all. That was good news. But if he hadn't been discovered, what had happened to him? Here was a puzzle, to be sure.

But Rex had no chance to ponder on Butterball's tardiness, for the big thug, whom Rex rightly believed to be the notorious "Bub" Freeman, was addressing him.

"Who sent you out here?" he growled, and when Rex merely shook his head, continued:

"Well, it don't make no difference. Me and my pal is about ready to pull out o' here, and then maybe someone'll come and find you—or else." He grinned and displayed a beauti-

ful set of brown, decayed teeth. "Nice rat food you'd make anyway. The poor critters ain't had a good meal in a long time." A thought seemed to strike him. "I'll thank you now for the car, buddy, because we'll take it along with us. Pretty soft for Shifty and me, I'll say. A nice cut of the swag for each of us, and a car apiece to boot." He swaggered his gross body up and down the length of the room.

Meanwhile Rex's mind was working double time. So they only expected a "cut" of the "swag." That proved right then and there the truth of the original "hunch" that he had had. Someone had sent for these crooks, and, in return for the information which had made the burglaries possible, was to receive a share of the proceeds. It showed that someone had more than the desire for loot at the bottom of his plan. That was the important thing, and if he ever got free, or if Butterball returned in time, he was going to prove everything.

What would happen when they found no car outside? Rex waited in silence, as Bub started a fire in the iron boiler and extracted a frying pan from beneath the bundle of rags

upon which he had slept. Into this he placed a few strips of bacon, and set the pan over the flame. He next filled the coffee pot from a bucket of water, and balanced it alongside the pan. Soon the odor of sizzling bacon assailed Rex's nostrils. Lord, he was hungry!

His captor seemed impatient at Shifty's delay, and kept looking at his watch from time to time. At last there was a scraping in the cellar below, as the little man dragged a box across the floor in order to raise himself within reach of the ceiling.

"Comin' up," he called, and immediately his head was thrust through the opening in the floor.

"No car," he announced laconically.

"What!" the other roared. "You poor sap, did you look all around?"

"Yep, all the way up the hill. No car. And we better drag out o' here quick. No wonder the kid ain't scared. Whoever he come out here with got tired of waiting and went back to town. That means the 'bulls.' Me for the car. I'll warm her up, and you haul out the sparklers. That guy can wait for his cut."

He ducked down and was gone. Freeman scattered the rag pile again, and drew forth

a long, tin box. Its contents clinked as he swung it up from the floor. The balance of the bucket of water he poured over the fire, bacon, and all. A cloud of smoke rose up from the boiler, and with an oath he flung Shifty's blanket over the tripod. Just as he finished this operation, the box still tucked under his arm, Shifty stuck his head up through the hole again. His face was white with fear, and his lips trembled.

"She won't start," he cried, "that dratted kid has put her on the fritz. What'll we do?"

Bub paled in turn. Then he strode toward the helpless boy.

"What'd you do to that car," he shouted, and at Rex's continued silence gnashed his teeth in anger. His face purpled with rage.

"Come clean, kid, or I'll . . ." he drew a revolver from one pocket, and was poking it menacingly into the prostrate boy's ribs when a frightened cry came from Shifty.

"We're sunk, Bub, here come the 'bulls.' " He pointed out the window. Bub rushed over and peered out, his gun still in his hand.

"They don't get me so easy," he roared, and from another pocket extracted a second revolver. Shifty did likewise.

Rex's heart was racing. He could hear the screaming of brakes as a car halted in the road below. The two crooks had slipped to either side of the window facing the police car, and were flattened against the wall, their guns poked out from the edge of the casement.

"Pick 'em off as they get out," said Shifty, calmer now that trouble was near.

Bang! His gun roared. A puff of smoke drifted from the barrel. Bang! again, and a cry from below followed. Plunk! A bullet whizzed through the window and flattened against the wall. The war was on.

Bullets began to pepper the walls, and to splinter the window frame. Freeman yelled as one of them ricocheted off the outer brick and skinned his forehead. Blood trickled into his eyes but he wiped it away, and returned fire. One gun was empty, and he paused to plug in a fresh magazine which he drew from his pocket. His companion kept up a steady fire upon the car until his guns were both empty. He then reloaded in turn.

During these first moments Rex feared the possibility of a stray bullet striking him as he lay helpless on the floor. Plaster and brick fragments had already fallen upon him from

the riddled walls. Cautiously he started to roll over towards the hole in the middle of the room. He would risk tumbling down it to comparative safety in the cellar. He rolled once, then twice, the second roll bringing his head over the opening. Suddenly he rolled back.

“Stick ’em up!”

Hallowell, a gun in each hand, was waist high in the opening. Both crooks dropped their guns, as the detective clambered through the hole. He had been mounted on Butterball’s shoulders, and the fat lad was following through the trap. Rex grinned amiably at the perspiring face of his chum.

“Good old Butterball,” he said.

CHAPTER X

THE MAYOR MURMURS

“BY GEORGE, your father will be glad to see you, you young rip,” said Hallowell to Rex, after the two belligerent prisoners had been handcuffed and led from the mill by two uniformed policemen. “He doesn’t know yet what happened to you last night, and I dare say he’s worried sick. What was the idea of coming out here alone, anyway?” he added.

The boy grinned cheerfully.

“We weren’t positive that we’d find anyone here,” he averred, “and after all it was only supposed to be a reconnoitering expedition. It was my own fault that I got into this scrape, but I didn’t expect to be forced into a fight, even though I was foolish enough to enter the mill.” Then he recounted the incident of the broken ladder and his subsequent foray with the thieves.

“From the appearance of those two,” remarked Hallowell, nodding in the direction of

the road where the crooks were waiting under guard, "I get the impression that you were pretty hard to handle. That Lee fellow looks as though someone had gone over his face with a hammer. He won't forget you so quickly, you can bet."

"I suppose," he went on, "that you're wondering what became of the shrinking Violet over there. We didn't see him until about three quarters of an hour ago."

Butterball, still dressed in the ridiculous regalia of the previous night and looking particularly sheepish, spoke up:

"Say, Rex, I'm sorry as the dickens, but the truth is that I fell sound asleep waiting for you. When I woke up it was about six-thirty, and as soon as I realized what had happened, I burnt up the road to town and brought back the Sergeant and his merry men. Luckily we had sense enough to get out of the car at the top of the hill. We sneaked down toward the side of this place while the cops kept on down the road to attract attention to the front. But honestly I feel a chump for having fallen asleep. . . ."

Rex walked over to his chum and placed an arm about the contrite lad's shoulders.

"Don't let it worry you, old boy, because they wouldn't have done anything to me. They were all set to run with the loot leaving me here for you to find. It would have been much worse had you come too late to catch them. I put their car on the blink but they would have struck off into the woods and trusted to luck."

"This part of the tangle is fairly well unraveled," he continued, "and we'll get to the important part before tomorrow evening."

"Sergeant," he turned to Hallowell, "you've landed your men, and the routine of this job is over with, I suppose. However, there's one thing I'd like you to do for us. I'd like you to keep this arrest a secret for twenty-four hours. Lock 'em up but swear everyone to silence, or better, keep them right here until I give you the word tomorrow morning. Will you do it?"

Hallowell seemed disturbed. He was anxious to bring his prize back to Hilton, and to see them tucked away in the municipal jail. He could not forget, though, the debt he owed to both of these boys. Certainly they had shown him a thing or two.

"All right," he agreed. "You can have

your way, Rex but for the life of me I don't see the sense in all this."

"Rooney," he called, leaning out of the window, "bring those two roosters back to their perch, will you?"

When the silent, obdurate criminals were once more in the partitioned room, he spoke quickly to his subordinates:

"Rooney, you and O'Brien are to stay out here with these men until further orders. Cuff up their legs, and keep a strict watch over them. I'll send you food and some bedding later. One of you can fill a bucket at the creek but both of you be sure and stay out of sight should anybody pass by here."

He looked at the boys, "Well, let's be on our way. I'll carry that box of jewelry."

Soon they were scooting homeward in the big police car that had been used in place of Rex's roadster. Several freshly made dents in the body, and a narrow, clean hole in the upholstery of the back seat bore mute evidence of the recent pistol duel. It was fortunate that both policemen had been cautioned to expose no part of their bodies as they drove up to the mill.

For the first time, Rex became conscious of

the aches and pains that made his whole being feel like one enormous bruise. It was just like the aftermath of a football game, when injuries sustained during the play become suddenly apparent. He sank back and closed his eyes, listening to the running chatter of Hallowell and Butterball as they rolled along. Lord, he was tired. But he mustn't fall asleep—no, sir, he mustn't fall asl . . .

They awakened him as the car drew up before the Cole home. Hardly had the boys hoisted themselves from the seat when the Mayor came springing down the steps.

"Rex," he cried. "What in the world has happened to you? Where have you been, lad? And just look at your face. My eye! I've been scared stiff. I knew that something would come of all this detective business. Jim (he turned to Hallowell), why did you let this young idiot go wherever he went, eh?"

"Let him go!" the detective exclaimed. "Why, I didn't know myself until an hour ago that he was out at . . ."

"Not now, Sergeant," Rex pleaded, "I'll tell Dad all about it inside. Anyone to see us standing here in these outfits would think us crazy. Take Butterball home and put him

to bed, and be sure to get him out of those duds. It hurts me to laugh." He walked up the steps, pulling his father after him.

The two "King Coles" faced each other over the breakfast table some twenty minutes later. Rex had bathed and changed his clothes, feeling decidedly more chipper than he had before his journey home. A neat strip of plaster covering the cut on his forehead was the only remaining evidence of last night's excitement.

The Mayor, slightly less haggard and appreciably relieved, forebore questioning the lad until a gigantic breakfast had disappeared like magic down Rex's throat. The older man was about to speak, after the last morsel of wheat cake had been ravenously devoured, when Rex began his account.

"Dad, we've got them, the chaps who stole that jewelry, and the jewels as well. The stuff was in that box the Sergeant was holding, and the men are securely locked up and guarded out at the Old Mill, that place way out of town you know."

The Mayor, though overjoyed at the news, was puzzled.

"Why out there?" he asked.

“That’s what Hallowell wants to know, and if it hadn’t been for the fact that Butt and I were responsible for the capture, I don’t think he would have agreed to keep them there. The reason I asked him to do so, was because there’s something going to turn up that will knock you clean off your seat with surprise. Everybody’s been wondering how those thefts were carried out so perfectly. Well, we know how, and why. If you had seen these two jailbirds, you would have recognized the fact that it was not at all likely that they had planned all nine robberies, counting the one at Bauer’s last night.”

“Then you think there is some master mind controlling them,” his father suggested.

“Nope, not a master mind, just a mind that has been shrewd enough to work out a scheme that seemed flawless.

“You, yourself, taught me that the flawless scheme was always the one that eventually displayed some form of weakness. Well, the weakness in this one lay in the fact that the burglaries were perfect as to execution but they lacked variety as far as locality was concerned. In other words, from the human point of view they, were too obviously alike in every

respect. But all that will come out later, I'm sure.

"The big thing, Dad, is that the hunch Butterball and I had right from the start, was correct. We proved that the day out at the Boyden house. But we didn't have sufficient evidence that would bear weight. We haven't yet but it won't be hard to find. In fact by tomorrow morning, as I told you, I think you'll be ready to believe that your own theory about squelching crime by getting at the roots of it—the people drawn into crime for some obscure reason—is no longer a theory but an actual fact.

"Of course," he hastened to say, "it was a good bit of luck that we got the actual criminals so soon." He then described the events of the night before, beginning with the assault upon him in the tree clump.

"If I hadn't ripped this Shifty Lee's pocket in falling, the paper wouldn't have dropped out and we wouldn't have known where to look. That would have meant more time wasted though we had something up our sleeves which might have worked even if the crooks had never been caught. I'll tell you about that later, too.

"Today I'm going to round up a little information and pay another visit to the mill. I want to see Messrs. Lee and Freeman again. Then, tonight, you can call up every one of the families that were robbed, and ask the gentlemen of each house to come to your office at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Say that you want to see them on some civic affair."

The Mayor looked at his son with amusement.

"You are certainly mysterious, Rex, and I don't see what difference all this is going to make now that we have the crooks. The jewels will be returned, and our friends, Lee and Freeman, will contribute to the State Road development service for many a year. As far as my—er—worthy opponent is concerned, I think that the apprehension of those cracksmen will somewhat peeve him." His eyes shone. "Hilton is my city, Rex, and as long as I am able, I want to add to its glory. It's not your father who counts, son, it's the people who live and work here. We can't have Hilton in the hands of a dangerous political machine."

Rex smiled back at Mayor Cole. "What a wonderful Dad you are," he thought. "If I'm

half as good as you, I'll never have to worry." He rose from the table.

"I'm going to leave now, Dad, but this time I'll be back for dinner. Don't let Jim Hallowell pretend to you that I was in any danger last night. He's liable to tell you that I went out there to get those men single handed."

His father stared quizzically at this strapping youngster who was almost dictating to him: "I wouldn't be surprised if you did," he thought, and then a twinge of fear crept through him. "Supposing something serious had happened to him. . . ." He raised tear dimmed eyes to the portrait of a lovely lady that hung upon the wall. "He's a man now, dear," he murmured softly. Rex had left the room. It was a good thing for the man recollected that he would stand alone if anything happened to this boy of his. Of course he was no longer a child but a husky boy—no, man—who had, like he himself had had to do, fight his way along. He admired his pluck and nerve but somehow wished he could shoulder his son's dangers. He realized that was not the way to make him useful. No, he would let him make his own way but he worried nevertheless and prayed that his son would

be carried safely through this mysterious business of which he could not guess the answer. He knew only that the culprits had been caught and their loot was now safe in Hallowell's care.

CHAPTER XI

REX CHECKS UP

REX whistled merrily as he strode along to City Hall in order to retrieve his car which Butterball had left there. Many an eye was turned in his direction, appraising the handsome, athletic looking youth as he swung briskly down the street. Almost everyone knew him to be the Mayor's son—Young King Cole—and many were sorry that the outlook for his father seemed so dark. Had they but known the true state of affairs.

The roadster had been parked close to the City Hall entrance, and Rex hopped into it and drove off. He headed out toward the more exclusive residential district, and presently drew up before a magnificent home on Yew Street. A liveried servant answered his ring.

"Is Mrs. Tierney at home?" he asked, and at the affirmative response to this question, said: "Will you tell her that Rex Cole,

junior, would like to see her for a moment or two."

He waited in the foyer hall into which the butler had ushered him, until Mrs. Tierney, a white haired, dignified old lady, came down the stairs to greet him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tierney," he said, "I came to ask you to tell me something about the night the robbery took place here."

"My soul, Rex," she answered, "I've told all I know to everyone but the janitor in City Hall. But if you wish, I'll go through it again."

He followed her into the drawing room which was so delightful. She indicated a comfortable chair.

"Tell me everything that took place from dinner time until the time you returned home after theater," he begged, "who was in the party; where you went, and how long you were away."

Mrs. Tierney composed herself comfortably in a chair, and began to relate in detail the events of that particular evening.

"We were seven at dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Kennelly, Mr. and Mrs. Mead, Mr. Bauer, and ourselves. Mr. Tierney had ordered

tickets for the theater, and as everyone was anxious to see this play, it was a road company presenting "The Royal Family," we left here at eight-fifteen driving to the Playhouse. During an intermission we met several other couples—the Boydens, the Larsons and the Grigsbys—and agreed to go over to the Illinois Roof afterwards to have supper and watch the young folks dance.

"We were at the roof garden until almost one o'clock, and then returned home. Mr. Tierney and myself were dropped at our door by the others. When we entered the house, Mr. Tierney went into the library for a book, and then we both went upstairs. Not until we arrived in our bedroom did we notice anything wrong. But then, oh, what a sight! Everything in the room had been turned topsy-turvy. The first thing I did was to make certain that my jewel case was still safe in its drawer. Of course it wasn't—and that's all there is left to tell. I don't suppose we'll ever recover a thing, although we were insured, because my jewelry was supposed to be deposited in Mr. Tierney's wall safe in the drawing room. It isn't the money, so much, that we want, but I had a diamond pendant

that I was saving for my youngest daughter. Oh, dear,—it seems a pity.’ She sighed as Rex rose to leave. He thanked her profusely for being so kind.

“You never can tell,” he said cheerfully, as he prepared to bid her farewell. “Something may turn up yet. The police are still working on the case, and they expect results.”

Rex’s next move was to call upon another of the victims who had suffered at the hands of the nefarious duo. Here, too, he had the story of the night upon which the crime had taken place related in full detail.

Thus he spent the best part of the day checking the accounts of the various persons whose homes had been ravaged. There were seven of these, all told, for the other two were already familiar to him—the Boyden case and lastly the affair of the Bauer necklace. After each interview he carefully jotted down any facts that seemed particularly relevant although he knew for the most part what he was going to hear before he had been told. Lastly he spent a few moments in conversation with Werthan, the Boyden’s butler.

This visit was completed toward four o’clock in the afternoon. The lateness of the

hour was caused by the temporary absence of two of the ladies he had called upon in the morning. However, by four o'clock, these two had returned, and their stories were subsequently noted.

Rex was pleased with his observations. They tallied again with the "hunch." Now for a quick trip out to the mill.

For what was technically the second time that day, he sped along the State Highway and turned down the Old Mill Road. This trip he was delayed by considerable traffic, especially on the Highway, but Rex was in no hurry. At last he came to a halt above the mill, and parked the car in the identical spot that it had occupied during the night. Again he walked down the road, and cut through the undergrowth toward the gaunt building. In the daylight it seemed even more dilapidated and ramshackle.

Approaching the side wall of the mill, he called softly.

"Rooney."

A shock of red hair was thrust out of the window above.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Rex? Are ye comin' up?"

"Yes, and I'd like to talk with those men, Rooney, alone if you don't mind."

"Sure, Mr. Rex, and O'Brien and meself could be after takin' a bit of a stroll in the back. It ain't so what you might call comfortable up here." The shock of red hair was withdrawn from the window, and Rex proceeded to enter the basement through the window he had used last night. In a moment he was upon the scene of his struggle with Lee and Freeman, who were now securely trussed and seated upon the floor, their backs against the wall. Rooney and his partner slipped down the hole, leaving Rex to chat at his leisure with the thieves.

"Hello, boys," he said, "Too bad you didn't leave last night. That's what you get for waiting to make that 'cut.'" He peered narrowly at the sorry looking faces turned toward him.

"That's all right," said Shifty Lee. "You can crow all you want. I'm sorry I didn't give you the works last night. But this monkey," he wriggled in the direction of the monstrous Freeman, "he's a softy." The little fellow lapsed into silence.

"Don't you wonder how I came to find you

out here?" asked Rex, still studying the features of the two men in front of him.

"Well, I'll tell you something," he continued, "I knew you were in this mill because somebody tipped off Jim Hallowell, the chief of detectives, that something was going on out here, and Jim sent me to look you over. What's more, I was on duty at that ball last night, and I was the fellow you laid out in the trees. But not before I saw your face, Lee."

Rex addressed this last to the vulturelike Shifty. He was almost snarling his words attempting to display a streak of hardness that would deceive the crooks into believing him to be "on the force." By now both of them were regarding him with mouths agape and murder in their eyes.

The boy took advantage of the doubt he had caused in the minds of both:

"It's not going to do either of you any good to shut up and take a trip up the river for the man who brought you down here—and then gave you away when he got cold feet."

He snapped this out, and then, walking up to where they sat, knelt down and whispered in Shifty's ear. The crook heard him through, and then an oath passed his lips.

"The rotten double crosser," he howled. "We'll fix him, all right. He told us that if anything happened he'd get us off easy, the rat," and a string of elaborate expletives flowed freely from his twisted mouth, to which the mighty William Bub Freeman added his own choice selection after he had surmised the import of his pal's statement.

Rex smiled to himself, as he called Rooney and O'Brien back to their posts. Then he left the mill and resumed his journey, this time homeward. On the way he reflected upon the links in the chain that had been forged that afternoon. "And how that tall story hit those poor fellows. It's lucky I read about that stunt in a detective yarn," he thought.

Dinner that night was more pleasant than it had ever been since the first robbery had occurred. Mayor Cole was in high spirits and eager for the morrow when his son's secret would be exposed. Butterball was there, too, a greatly refreshed Butterball who had slept the entire day. "I wonder if the city editor is waiting for my copy or my resignation by request," he said laughingly. "But tomorrow I'll give him the biggest headline special he's ever had. Hot Doggy!"

After the meal, the boys repaired to Rex's room to go over the details of the finished case. Mayor Cole telephoned the men whom Rex had selected, and all agreed to be at the City Hall in the morning. There was nothing to do but wait patiently for the next day. And a Red Letter day it promised to be! At least that's what Rex and Butterball thought as they sat together, planning the dénouement with which they hoped to surprise not only Hallowell, and the Mayor, but every blessed soul in Hilton, too.

The ringing of the telephone, and Strewth's subsequent call for Rex, interrupted their conversation. Rex hurried downstairs, and picked up the receiver. It was Hallowell, and something was wrong.

CHAPTER XII

ESCAPE

HALLOWELL'S booming voice came to Rex through the receiver.

"They're gone! They're gone!" he shouted, "and you're to blame, too. Ryan just staggered in here to tell me the news. Won't bother telling you about it now, but you can come over here as soon as possible. I've got to organize a posse to hunt through the woods, and it'll take time, valuable time."

Rex's brain was working lightning fast. He had to say something, and say it quick.

"Don't," he called, "don't do a thing. Forget your posse, and wait for me. I'll be over in a second. This is as good a break as we could have hoped for. Remember, don't do anything until I get over to see you."

He hung up, in time to cut short the string of mighty oaths that had started to pour through the telephone. He couldn't blame Hallowell, but this was really a good thing.

The convicts had escaped, that much he had learned, but they had no car, and no money. They couldn't go very far in the night, and, unless he missed his guess, he knew just the place they would head for in their flight. Of course it meant letting Hallowell in on his secret but he could depend on the man to remain dumb until the proper time had arrived.

Rex called to Butterball, told him the news, and raced off to get his car. Soon the two of them were speeding in the direction of Hallowell's home, for it had been there that the Sergeant had been apprised of the escape.

With a screaming of brakes, and a crazy lurch, the little car pulled up to the curb before Hallowell's residence. The two boys hastened up the steps and into the living room. They found the Sergeant seated in a chair and talking hurriedly through the phone. From his speech, it was simple to surmise that he was getting in touch with various members of his force.

The policeman, Rooney, was seated in another corner of the room, his uniform splattered with mud and a white bandage tied carefully about his head. The shock of red hair looked almost comical, standing up as it

did above the bandage. He grinned dismally at the boys, but said nothing. Finally Hallowell clashed the receiver down on its hook, and scowled at Rex.

"Rooney will tell you the details," he said, "and it's as much his fault as anyone's. But what's all this about not sending out a hunting party after those two birds. Maybe you'd like us to find them and give them a car to ride in. I hate to think of those poor hard working young fellows out alone in this cold." His sarcasm was wasted on Rex.

"Sergeant," the boy said, "this is a real break, as I said before. Those men will head to one place, and I know that place. I was out there this afternoon, and I might as well tell you that they are both pretty sore at somebody. They think that they were framed, and that leads into something else that I have to tell you. Those men were hired to do what they have done, and I know who hired them. Now that they are sure that their employer gave them up to the law, their only step is to avenge themselves on him. They have no money, no car, and naturally they'd be afraid to enter any nearby town or city, unless they knew definitely where to go. That brings the

trail right down to Hilton, and I'm going to take you right to them, for I don't doubt for a minute that they are there right now. But first let's hear from Rooney. There's lots of time, and I'd like to know all about it."

The Sergeant was amazed. What was this young whippersnapper doing but trying to tell him how to run his business. He seemed so cool and confident, too. The Sergeant scratched his head.

"I've got to get some one out there to pick up the trail, no matter what you say," he explained. "Otherwise, if you should be wrong, it would mean the 'hook' for me for failing to take ordinary precautions. Still," again he scratched his head, "I could send a few men out, and stay here myself. Then we'd be killing two birds with one stone."

Rex smiled. He was pleased that the Sergeant had been so tractable. Now everything would be 'hunky-dory.' He turned to question Rooney, while the Sergeant hastened to telephone his men again, countermanding his previous orders, and sending only two of his force out to the mill with powerful search-lights.

When he had finished, Rooney was in the

midst of his story, the two boys listening with interest to his every word.

“Y’see,” he was saying, “O’Brien went out for a drop of water to wet our whistles, leavin’ me to stand guard over thim two divils. I was pacin’ up and down in the room, whistlin’ as gay as a lark in summertime. The prisoners were sittin’ back to back close to the wall, and not makin’ a sound.

“I was wonderin’ when O’Brien was comin’ back, and somehow I must have walked over to that bloomin’ hole in the floor, with me back to the prisoners. What do I know, but one of thim, I think it was the little one, kicks out his leg and sends me flyin’ through the hole. Thin he must have rolled over and fallen through after me. Right on my back, he fell, and I’m glad he didn’t break it. Well, he was there on top of me, and me almost unconscious from the drop on to that cement. What does he do but up with his ’cuffed wrists and knock me out with the metal part between his hands. Thin he went through me pockets and found the keys, lettin’ himself out an’ thin the other.

“O’Brien says that they waited for him to come back, and thin got him, too, with a piece

of iron pipe. Both of us were out 'cold,' and it was a while before I came to enough to realize what had happened. I brought O'Brien around, and then left him there while I set out for town. There would have been no use for us to look for those divils in the woods. It was dark, and they might have been waitin' for us only to murder us or somethin'. They had taken our guns and clubs, as well as all our cartridges.

"Thin," he concluded, "I walked part of the way back, and hailed a car on the main road. I sure would like to be layin' these hands on those birds again." He motioned with a huge, hairy fist, indicating what would befall the miserable crooks.

A sudden crash behind him made both the policeman and Rex jump. As might have been expected, Butterball had started to sit down, and had misjudged the strength of one of the Sergeant's chairs. Hallowell had to laugh, in spite of himself. "You're more trouble than you're worth," he shouted at the fat boy who was carefully gathering the pieces together. Butterball was nothing if not neat.

"Now," the Sergeant continued, after having assured Butterball that he would re-

fuse any payment for the broken chair, "let's get busy and plan our next movements. Rex, where do we go from here?"

The boy remained silent for a moment. Evidently he was debating with himself as to just what the next move should be, for he wanted to make no mistakes on this particular evening. Even though he was certain as to the course that the evening's events would take, he realized that it was a ticklish business, especially as the Sergeant was completely ignorant of the 'hunch' that had motivated all of his and Butterball's actions. The only thing to do was to inform the Sergeant of such items as would be necessary to the culmination of the adventure which was in the offing, a culmination that would undoubtedly mark the success of the investigation afoot.

He looked over at Butterball, and having attracted the fat lad's attention, turned slowly toward Hallowell.

"I'll go over everything in a moment, Sergeant Hallowell," he said, "but first we must insure absolute secrecy as far as our conversation goes. How about locking the doors and windows in here and stationing Rooney

out in the hall there to stop anyone who might take a notion to walk in during the next few moments?"

Hallowell agreed.

"Stand outside that door," he ordered the policeman, "and if anyone wants to see me, tell them that I'll be free in a short while. And furthermore, don't let any of those wise cracking reporters pull any of their tricks on you. Everyone is to remain away from that door until I give the word to let them in."

Rooney nodded and left the room closing the door carefully behind him. The Sergeant turned the key, and then, taking a comfortable seat, motioned to the boys to do likewise. The three of them sat in the corner farthest from the door, so that the murmur of their voices would not be heard by anyone on the outside.

"That was a good way to get rid of Rooney," Butterball commented. "There's no use in letting everybody in on this. Only," he said to Hallowell, "what was the big idea of that 'wise cracking reporter' business? I guess you know who I am—The pride of the Hilton 'Sentinel'."

"I'll admit," the Sergeant answered, "that you've been pretty good, and have confined all your 'cracks' to furniture and the like. A young fellow as big as you is a social menace—a home breaker—but we'll take care of you after this case is finished." Both grinned broadly. The older man had a liking for the fat boy despite his clumsiness. He knew that Butterball didn't say much but what he did say usually was full of common sense. However, he resumed his brusque attitude as he started to question Rex. From now on they must stick to business, and that business was mighty, mighty important. Everyone present, and many not present, had much to lose were those criminals to remain at large. It all depended on the judgment of a youth hardly out of his teens, yet somehow, the Sergeant was ready to follow implicitly his young friend's instructions. His first question to Rex went right to the point.

"You said you knew where these thugs were going," he reminded the boy. "What I want to know is: What place have you in mind?"

Rex hesitated as he phrased his reply. To name the place would startle the Sergeant.

He wouldn't believe him. And then, too, there was no real need to name it.

"I won't tell you the name of the place, Sergeant, because I'm going to take you there in a little while, and the less you know, the better you'll be able to appreciate just what is sure to happen. Don't think that I'm making a mystery of this on purpose but I want you to see and hear with your own eyes the things that this night will bring forth. I'm certain that Butterball agrees with me." He glanced at his chum who gravely nodded his head.

"I'll tell you this," Rex continued, "the place is not far from here, and we won't have to hurry to get there. It's half past nine now, and if we arrive about ten-thirty we'll be in plenty of time."

"Then," the Sergeant asked, "how many men do we need to come along on this little party?"

Rex's answer was brief. "None," he said, "except yourself and Butterball, of course. We won't have any trouble landing our men, and a bunch of your bruisers would only clutter up the place and let the cat out of the bag, perhaps. It's all important that we keep this whole affair as quiet as possible until to-

morrow morning. The reason is that we want to take the guilty parties by surprise, and by 'guilty parties' I don't mean our friends Freeman and Lee. They were only tools, only catspaws in this whole series of crimes. You don't think for a minute, do you, that those poor safe crackers could have engineered the entire show?"

Hallowell scratched his head. "Nope, I don't think, now, that they're the type to pull off the jobs so smoothly. But who tipped them off, then, and gave them all the information they needed?"

"You'll know the answer to that before the night's out," Rex assured him. "But," he hastened to add, "you mustn't tell a soul. Tomorrow at noon every citizen of Hilton will know the solution to this amazing string of thefts but until then we'll have to keep our mouths shut."

"That's why Rex wants us to go alone," Butterball explained. "Otherwise someone might 'blab' before the proper time comes."

"Well, then," Hallowell inquired, "are we going to take these fellows when we find them or is it your idea to leave them alone?"

"We'll take them, all right," Rex said,

“and there won’t be any difficulty either because they won’t have any idea that we know where they are. We’ll jump them before they have a chance to figure out what has happened.”

Butterball arose ponderously from his seat and lifted the shade at one of the windows. “It’s black as Werthan’s face out,” he called, “no moon, stars or anything. And it’s going to be plenty cold, too.”

Hallowell grunted something about “so much the better” and started for the door. “It is only quarter to ten,” he told Rex, “and we’ve time to get some coffee and a sandwich or two. I’ll get my wife busy in the kitchen after I chase away anyone who’s waiting outside.” He unlocked the door, and passed out. Soon his deep voice could be heard sending the men he had ordered to meet him back to their homes or posts. Rooney, too, was allowed to leave after he had been instructed to send a car out to his companion at the mill. In the excitement nobody had thought of Patrolman O’Brien waiting patiently in that gloomy building.

In a few moments the welcome sound of dishes being rattled in the kitchen signalled

that Mrs. Hallowell was preparing a snack for her husband and the boys.

"It's surprising what an appetite you can work up with all this hubbub going on," Butterball said to Rex.

"You don't have to work one up—ever," the boy laughed. "Any time that you can't eat, I want to know about it." Whereupon the object of this brutal attack proceeded to clout his friend with a pillow until Rex begged for mercy. Justice thus administered, they strode off toward the kitchen.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE TRAIL

REX and Butterball were devouring generous helpings of bread laden with thick slices of ham when the Sergeant excused himself for a moment and left the kitchen. He returned shortly and planked two murderous looking automatic pistols upon the clean white of the table top. Mrs. Hallowell, who had been waiting upon the hungry boys, gasped.

"You're not going to let those lads carry guns, are you, Jim?" she asked anxiously.

"Why not?" her husband wanted to know. "Not that I think they'll need them but in case of trouble we can bluff these babies that we're out to corner. There's nothing more compelling than the sight of one of these 'cannons' when you're dealing with such as them." He began to fill the magazines from a handful of cartridge clips that he drew from a pocket.

Meanwhile the boys had ceased their attack upon the sandwiches, and were staring wide eyed at the Sergeant. Neither of them had ever carried a pistol for anything save amusement. Occasionally they had borrowed guns to engage in a bit of target practice in the woods but not for any such grim purpose as the Sergeant had intimated. Even Butterball lost his appetite—for a moment.

“We don’t want to use these unless we have to,” Hallowell went on to say, “and perhaps, if we do find trouble, it would be best if you just did a little gentlemanly blackjack-ing with the ‘butt’ ends. I’ll load them, of course, but you both leave the safety catches on the guns. If there should be any shooting, I’ll do all on our part. I can take one of your pistols when my own is empty.” He snapped the catches and handed one to each of the boys. “Stick ’em in your overcoat pockets, and don’t take ’em out unless I give the word.”

Rex felt a slight sinking in the pit of his stomach as he accepted the proffered gun, but resolutely took it, later transferring it to his overcoat when the time came to leave. Butterball looked positively glum as he took the

one extended to him. He fingered the cold steel gingerly for a moment and then stuck it in his pocket. Every once in a while he patted the bulge that indicated the weapon, as if to make sure that it was still there. He, too, placed the gun in his overcoat at the time of departure.

But that was later. There still remained time to fill up on hot coffee and more sandwiches. The big boy's appetite could not be restrained for long, and only the recollection of that death dealing bit of blue steel in his pocket would cause him to forget temporarily the food before him. Sergeant Hallowell partook of the light supper, too, and with great gusto. This was the kind of thing that he liked to look forward to for it was directly in the line of work that years of experience had taught him to relish. No brain work in this business, that is, no intangible something upon which to build a web of evidence about a suspect. It would be straight police work, that was all. He forgot for the moment that they were basing their hopes upon the workings of Rex's agile mind. The thought that the crooks might not be in the spot where they were supposed to be never occurred to him.

"We'll have to be as silent as possible throughout this whole business," Rex cautioned the other two, "because our men, unless they are total imbeciles, will have gone to their employer and tried to make a deal in order to save their skins. They wouldn't be fools enough to do him any harm if they could wangle protection and possible transportation from him, even if they think he gave them away in the first place. Thus we don't want their protector to know that we've retaken them, until the time comes—tomorrow.

"Furthermore, this fellow who's at the bottom of it all is going to know that someone of us is wise to his scheme, and his only hope will be to get Freeman and Lee away from here as soon as possible, which means sometime in the early morning, certainly not before midnight. He isn't stupid enough to start them out earlier than that, for he must figure that the watch on outgoing cars will be stricter up to twelve, and at the same time traffic will be heavier, making rapid progress difficult. It's lucky for him that these thieves have nothing to gain by harming him now for he'd be a dead man if they had."

"It's close to ten-thirty, Rex," Hallowell said, a few moments later, after glancing at his watch.

"Let's go, then," the boy answered, and all three went out into the hall to don their hats and overcoats. After bidding Mrs. Hallowell good-bye and thanking her for the welcome food, they descended the steps from the porch and clambered into Rex's car. Hallowell, for obvious reasons, was the calmest of the three as the little car started off down the street.

"Nervous, boys?" he asked.

"Just excited," Rex replied, but Butterball said nothing. He was too busy wondering what it would be like to bring the handle of his gun down on someone's skull.

They threaded their way through numerous Hilton streets, finally taking one of the main thoroughfares that led out through the residential districts. For a while, they rode in silence, each intent upon the events yet to come. Soon they had passed the homes of many of the recent theft victims for they were all more or less in the same vicinity. In fact many were next to each other separated by wide lawns and occasional stone fences.

Arriving at the end of the avenue upon

which they had been traveling, Rex turned off onto a gravel road, and then again onto another gravel road that paralleled the main street. Thus they were really reversing their direction, but this time they were returning in back of the houses just passed. This particular road was one used by trucks and tradesmen's delivery wagons, for none of these were allowed on the broad avenue upon which the houses fronted.

A few hundred yards down the road, Rex halted his car.

"We walk from here," he whispered to his companions, who struggled out of the machine. The three stood still for a moment, peering into the blackness that had surrounded them after Rex switched off his lights. There was no lighting at all on this bit of road, for it was seldom used after night-fall. In fact it had been constructed at the expense of those property owners who lived in that neighborhood, and they had not seen fit to provide illumination.

"Lord, it's dark," Butterball murmured, and for the first time felt a fondness for the gun in his pocket. Lights from many of the nearby houses were visible through the trees,

but these, of course, were too far away to be of any use to the three searchers. Fortunately Rex was familiar with the ground. He touched Hallowell and the fat boy, and the three began to move down the road. Rex led them off the gravel, for it crunched loudly beneath their feet, and they followed him along the soft turf that bordered the road. They must have negotiated several hundred yards before Rex stopped them. Before them, a few feet to the right, loomed a black mass that was evidently a building of some sort.

"Say," Hallowell muttered, "that looks to me like it might be a garage."

"It is," Rex whispered.

Now, more cautiously than before, they approached the dark outline of the building. Soon they were close enough to distinguish it clearly, despite the darkness. It was of the conventional two-story type, built of clapboard. The windows in the ground floor were dark, and those above appeared to be so too until closer inspection revealed a narrow, dim, almost invisible crack of light that had filtered through a hole in one shade.

"They're up there," Rex whispered again.

"We'll have to get in some way without making any noise. It's the fellow in that house that I'm afraid of, believe me." He motioned toward a huge mass of shadow several yards to the right. It was dark, save for a single light in one of the upper stories.

"Looks like Tierney's," Hallowell hazarded, but Rex suddenly pinched his arm.

A faint scraping could be heard coming from the garage. Somebody was opening one of the doors.

Hallowell started to slide forward, only to be held back by Rex. "No," the boy whispered into the Sergeant's ear; "not yet."

They could see the door gently opening, and then a dim, muffled figure stepped out, swung the door to silently, and disappeared in the shadows. The three watchers remained motionless, lest the faintest sound betray their presence.

For several long minutes they remained thus, until Rex again pinched the arms of Butterball and the Sergeant.

"Now," he said in a whisper, and they began to slither toward the garage door.

Slowly, slowly, they advanced, stepping on tiptoe because of the telltale gravel. The Ser-

geant was the first to reach the cement that extended about two yards from the closed door. Another step and he was near enough to grasp the handle. The boys ranged alongside of him as he carefully turned the knob. Not a sound could be heard as the catch lifted. The garage doors were evidently well oiled, for there was but the slightest creak as the one was opened sufficiently wide to enable them to slip through. They stood to one side of the car that was housed within, listening for some movement on the part of those above. Nothing came to their strained ears.

Slowly again, they skirted the car and approached the rear of the room where the stairs leading to the second story were located. Here Hallowell nudged Rex to ascend, he being the lightest of the three and less likely to make a noise upon the stairs. Rex was no coward. He began to climb, having drawn the gun from his pocket. It seemed a natural thing to do.

He paused on each step but heard nothing to indicate that his presence was known. At the landing atop the flight of stairs he stopped until the door that gave upon it became visible as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Then his hand fumbled for the knob. He

hoped it would turn as easily as had the other downstairs. It did. There was now but one thing to do. His heart beat madly as he clutched the gun tight in his hand.

With a quick twist of his wrist he flung open the door, and ordered: "Stick 'em up!" A small bulb was burning over a desk in one corner. He swept the dimly lighted room with his eyes. It was empty.

CHAPTER XIV

REX MAKES THE CAPTURE

JUST as Rex had flung wide the door, Butterball and Hallowell had sprinted madly up the steps. Now they peered in amazement and chagrin at the empty room that was visible over Rex's shoulder. The small bulb spread its feeble glow to the lad's face, white in anger and despair.

"Hmph!" the Sergeant grunted, although he was thinking things that would have sounded worse.

Butterball was the first to speak.

"Gosh, Rex," he said disconsolately, "they must have left early. Maybe we should have stopped that fellow who was leaving as we came up?"

"No," Rex answered sorrowfully. "That would have done no good. We know . . ." And then he shot a quick wink at Butterball, who seemed to understand.

"We might as well get out of here," the fat

lad said to Hallowell, and started downstairs. The Sergeant followed, muttering to himself. Rex brought up the rear. They were a sorry trio as they stood together in the darkness of the ground floor next to the car. "It's all my fault," Rex was saying when suddenly a strange thought flickered through his mind. He turned it over and over, examining it in every detail, and then the full meaning flashed upon him. Why had he been so blind, why had he not seen it all before? But how was he to follow it up without the support of Hallowell who would undoubtedly take no stock in anything he said from now on. Then the Sergeant himself unwittingly solved the problem.

"Say," he murmured almost to himself, "I wonder just whose garage this is?"

Here was Rex's chance, and he took it. Striking a match he held it up to the side of the car. "Mackerel!" he cried, "we're in the wrong garage. Look at that crest on the door!"

The Sergeant looked, and whistled. "Well, I'll be . . . Say, let's get out of here. I'll say this is the wrong garage, regardless of what anyone might say."

In a trice the three were outside the building, having carefully closed the door behind them. Rex was elated. There would be no mistake this time, he was sure.

"Follow me closely now," he said. "I don't know how I happened to pick that place at all. Must have been that the dark deceived me as far as the distances are concerned. Wouldn't we have been up a tree if we had landed on that chauffeur who came out of there?" He laughed gaily.

Hallowell didn't see any joke to that, and said as much. As for Butterball, he was trying to keep up with Rex's train of thought. One thing the large lad knew. They had been in the right place according to the "hunch." Where were they going now?

Rex started off along the road again, keeping to the turf as before. Things didn't seem quite so dark now, for they had become accustomed to the night. Still, there was no way of determining just what ranged on either side and before them, for Rex was the only one familiar with the ground. In the day time they would have recognized the homes but in the night they were entirely at sea. "Rex had better make no mistakes this time," was the

thought in both the Sergeant's and Butterball's minds as they followed in Indian file.

It was some fifteen minutes before Rex called a halt. Hallowell had been quite perplexed at the whole thing. How could Rex have misjudged the distance by so large a margin? Why, he had led them off the first road, onto another and narrower one, and then on to still another. To find these alleys (for that's all they were) was a work of genius. The boy must be a wonder. And to tell the truth, Rex was congratulating himself upon finding these byways that were hidden in the dark. He had come by memory alone, and fortunately that memory had been accurate. Otherwise they would have had to go back to the car, and come another way. And that would have meant the disclosing of the secret in its entirety. He dreaded the thought of that.

The place where Rex had halted his party of sleuths was not unlike that which they had first visited. Ahead loomed a building similar to the garage they had left behind, only it was surrounded by thick hedge and stood considerably closer to the house that lay dark and shadowy near by. The garage (for it was an-

other garage) was lighted from within but the light was scarcely discernible owing to the thickness of the hedge. Stray beams of it filtered through to the trio as they drew close to the wall nearest them. The sound of low voices could also be heard coming from the building. It seemed that whoever was in there didn't care particularly who knew it or else felt free from possible observation.

When Rex and his comrades reached the garage they found that they were directly behind it. Even as they crept to the window, holding aside the clutching branches of the hedge, they heard the sound of the doors being swung to. Simultaneously there came the whirl of a self starter going into action. Rex peered hastily through the window. With unbelieving eyes he saw the two crooks seating themselves in the front of a long, blue limousine. In a moment the wheels began to roll, and the car was heading out of the garage. The boy had no time to think, save that he must reach that car. He dashed around the building, his fleeting feet making no sound upon the grass. Hallowell and his companion were left standing dumbfounded.

Rex reached the corner of the garage just

as the car had started down the driveway. He raced desperately after it, praying that he could catch it before it had attained too great a momentum. There were no lights showing, but the car was visible in the glow from the lighted building behind. One, two, three, four—four long, leaping strides and he could touch the spare tire on the rear. Five—and he had managed to cling to it with both hands. Six—and with a superhuman effort he lodged his feet safely in the lower section of the tire rim. The car was gaining speed, and he clung for dear life to his precarious perch. This couldn't last long, his strength would fail, and even if it didn't the tire rack might give. He must find a more secure resting place.

They were passing now down a long driveway lined with trees. As yet the car showed not a single light, and Rex knew that they were trusting to blind fate to get out of that estate and on the road. He made up his mind that he would have to get on the roof of the limousine, some way, but he feared to try until they were out of the grounds. He knew those trees, knew that a lowhanging branch might sweep him off before he could get sufficient purchase on the roof. Stolidly he clung

to the tire, though his arms ached terribly. Only a few moments more and he would be able to seek some way of climbing to the top and comparative safety. He glanced at the rear window of the car, and saw to his delight that the tiny shade had been drawn. He thanked his stars for this, for his ascent would be unseen from the front.

The car swung around a bend, almost forcing Rex to loose his grip. The strain was terrific, but he knew that this was the end of the driveway. Now he would attempt the seemingly impossible feat of climbing to the top. There was only one chance of his accomplishing this task. In some manner he would have to wriggle around far enough to raise one foot to a rear fender. Once this was done, he could throw his weight upon this foot and clutch at the slippery top. With the car in motion this was a dangerous thing to do, but it had to be done.

Cautiously he shifted his body as far to the left as possible until it was a simple matter to extend his left leg outward and upward until the foot rested upon the fender top. He remained in this position for a second or two while he transferred his weight toward this

side by lifting his left hand free of the tire and placing it upon the top of the car. With a tremendous upthrust of his body, bearing down on the left foot, he swung up, clawing at the top with both hands. His weight was great enough to hold him, half his body across the top and the balance resting upon the one foot which had miraculously stuck to the slippery fender. He lay in this bent position for a moment trying to ease his lungs which seemed about to burst. Then he drew himself carefully across the tonneau until the whole of his frame was resting upon it. The sound of his ascent had not been heard above the noise of the motor for there was no diminution in the speed of the car.

Rex gripped both sides of the tonneau with his outstretched hands, and lay face down as close to the hard surface as possible. He feared that a sudden bump would jolt him off or at least make his presence known to the men below. Luckily he wore a heavy overcoat which prevented the gun, still in his pocket, from banging against the car. So far all was well.

He glanced around him as best he could, and noted that they had taken a road that was

poorly lighted, and which ran through no populous sections. Furthermore this road was never policed for most night traffic went on the larger and better paved State road. They might run for miles without sighting a car headed in either direction. Whatever the outcome of this adventure, it was obvious that the course of his actions must be guided by his own judgment, and that judgment told him that he must act quickly before some unforeseen event would render all his work useless.

Consequently he raised one hand long enough to draw the automatic from his overcoat pocket, and then began to wriggle forward until his head was level with the front of the car directly above the driver. His next action was to take a firm grip with one hand upon the ledge that stuck out a few inches above the windshield. It took another second to worm over until most of his body was concentrated on the left hand side of the car. All was now in readiness. The bumpings of the road presented some difficulties for Rex feared that he might be rolled off to what was almost certain death but the firmness of his grip on the narrow extension of the top reassured him. Well . . .

He leaned over, thrust the muzzle of his gun through the open window, and cried to the astounded driver: "Stop this car!"

Shifty, the driver, turned white and, in the fraction of a second that had elapsed, allowed the car to veer sharply as he unconsciously applied the brakes. Freeman was too startled to speak or move. With a crash the car turned off the road into a fence. Even as it turned, moving slowly, Rex had thrown himself from the top and landed, shaken but unhurt, upon the road. The car had stopped dead, its radiator nosing the fence. Rex picked himself up and raced over to it. The two occupants were trying to climb out of the seat but chose to remain after a terse command from the boy, as well as a threatening gesture from the gun in his hand. Obediently they raised their hands, as Rex walked up and searched them for weapons. Neither uttered a sound, save for a few guttural ejaculations from Shifty Lee. The little fellow seemed to fear no one but the gun in Rex's hand commanded respect.

"The jig's up for good, you birds," Rex told them. "This time you go to jail for keeps. I

told you that you were being double-crossed, and now maybe you'll believe me."

"That guy was lying to us," Bub Freeman whined. "It was all a trap to get us taken to the coop."

"Shut up," his seedy companion ordered. "I'll do the talkin' from now on." He turned in his seat to glare full at Rex, who stood with one foot on the running board, his gun poked in through the window. "We'll give you a thousand bucks, kid, to forget all about this," he said with a cunning leer. Rex shook his head.

"Not on your life. You can't bribe me." His brain was working fast. If these two desperadoes had a thousand dollars in their possession, it meant that they had just received it. The bills would clinch the evidence against the donor of that money.

"Two grand," Shifty was saying.

"It's no use," Rex replied. "There isn't enough money in the world to make me keep quiet. Don't bother any more. Back to the 'jug' you go." He opened the rear door of the car and climbed in, seating himself with the point of the gun directed at Shifty's

back. "Now see if that motor will turn over," he commanded, and when the driver demurred he shoved the gun into the small of the crook's spine. "Come on," he called. "Step on that starter."

Lee pressed his toe against the starter pedal, and the motor roared. The jar that accompanied the crash into the fence had done no harm to the engine. But when, at Rex's instruction, Shifty started to back up, the front of the car settled with a sudden lurch. The axle had been broken.

Rex left his seat in the rear, and ordered his prisoners out of the car. "We'll walk," he decided. After all they had traveled only about a mile and a half from the house. With the sullen crooks marching before him, he began to retrace his way toward the city. Road lamps, at infrequent intervals, afforded them their only light for traveling. Not a single car passed, for it was too late now to expect any travelers along that back highway.

Silently they plodded along, the thieves a few feet before Rex. The boy was weary and bruised from his fall. These past few nights had been a bit too active for even an athletic youth like the Mayor's son. He hoped that a

good rest would be in order after the case had been closed on the morrow. While he walked, he thought of the speech that he would have to make in his father's office. Being the only one in complete possession of all the facts, it would fall to him to make the explanation. He became so rapt in this mental survey, that he was hardly aware of the swift turn that the larger of the two crooks had executed just as they were passing a road lamp. He had come a bit too close to his charges, and Freeman, taking a desperate chance, had wheeled and struck out at him. Rex was startled into action. He tightened his finger on the trigger of his gun, but the small bit of metal failed to move. He had forgotten to unfasten the safety catch. In the fraction of a second, Freeman's big fist had crashed into his face, even as his shorter friend went into a dive that wrapped him about Rex's legs. They fell to the road, struggling to overcome the boy who was fighting like a wildcat. He remembered to reverse the position of the automatic in his hand, clubbing away at his assailants with the blunt handle. If they overpowered him, he would be a goner. The husky, brutal Freeman swung again and again, while Shifty Lee,

with Rex's legs held in a "scissors" grip, was trying to extract one of the two guns the boy had taken from them from his overcoat pocket. Rex managed to free one arm for a moment, and brought his clubbed gun down on the little fellow's head. With a moan, the limp body relaxed and the lad was free to deal with his second opponent. He dodged the flailing fists, and, with his head, butted Freeman in the stomach as he rose to his knees. Fortunately it was a telling blow, for he heard the big fellow gasp for breath. Rex jumped to his feet, and swung his gun. Crunch! And Bub joined his confederate in unconsciousness. Rex looked down at the prostrate forms at his feet. What was there to do now? He unlocked the safety catch on the automatic and pointed the gun in the air. Crack! The report echoed through the surrounding woods. He fired three times more, and then waited a little. Finally he emptied the magazine in the air, and took one of the other pistols from his pocket. It was loaded and he grasped it tightly in his hand, first making sure that there was no catch to impede its operation. Then he sat down by the road and waited.

Someone must have heard those shots and help would soon arrive.

The first indication of assistance came a few minutes later in the shape of a small dog that trotted down the road yelping at the top of its lungs. Then a lantern came into view, held by someone who had followed the dog. That "someone" proved to be a young farmer who explained that he had heard the shots, and had hurried after the dog to learn their source. He stared in amazement at the disheveled boy, and at the silent forms stretched in the road.

Rex hastened to inform him of what had happened, and the farmer, after much head scratching, consented to lend his Ford to the cause. He left Rex seated on a rock, and returned shortly in a chugging car that rattled to a stop at the side of the road. The farmer had brought some stout rope, and between them they securely bound the as yet unconscious robbers. It was the work of a moment to dump them into the back of the car, and the car was soon snorting down the road toward Hilton, glowing in the distance. Rex directed the farmer to Hallowell's home, and upon their arrival before it the blaze of lights from

within told him that the Sergeant must have returned thither to wait for news.

Tired as he was, Rex vaulted up the steps and burst into the living room. The Sergeant and Butterball jumped to their feet as he entered.

"They're outside," Rex assured them. "Go out and take a good look."

He sank into a chair while the others dashed out to view the trussed up reasons for the night's excitement. Both had regained consciousness, but were still dazed. Rex had not spared his strength when he had manipulated that clubbed automatic.

With some difficulty the crooks were dragged into the house and placed in the living room upon the floor. Handcuffs were substituted for the ropes, and then they were allowed to sit in chairs. Blood was oozing from both scalps where the skin had been broken and Mrs. Hallowell deftly wrapped bandages about them.

"Shall we take them down to the station house?" Hallowell wanted to know, after the farmer had left, having promised to tell nothing.

"How about your cellar?" Rex suggested.

"We can stick them down there, and this time Butterball will stand guard outside the locked door to your storeroom. They can't get out of there, and with old 'Butt' as the reserve artillery, we don't need to fear a second 'break'."

"That suits me," the Sergeant said. "I've got an extra strong door down there, and the window in the storeroom isn't big enough to let a cat through, besides being barred. But how about this fellow?" He turned to the fat boy, "Think you can stay up all night? Or any way a part of the night? I'll take turns with you."

"I can let your folks know that you're staying with me," Rex broke in, and with that Butterball agreed. The three then led the culprits down to the cellar, and closed the strong, storeroom door upon them. Butterball, gun in hand, took up his station upon a chair outside the temporary prison cell. "I'm set," he said, and the other two left him.

Rex, when they had returned to the living room, explained to the Sergeant his reason for keeping the thieves away from the city jail.

"If we took them down there," he said, "the news would be sure to get out. By now I guess

you know whose car that was, and why we have to be so cautious. I suppose you know, too, that there are two of them in on this, and if they think their men have gotten away safely, they will feel secure enough to bluff out any trouble we might cause. I'm going home now and you know all the arrangements for tomorrow. One thing more I wish you would do. Open up that strong box and check what you find with the descriptions of the missing jewels."

Having thus accomplished everything that he had hoped for, Rex departed to a good night's sleep, if that was possible, with the great day less than twelve hours away.

CHAPTER XV

REX SPRINGS HIS SURPRISE

THE City of Hilton shone brightly in the gleaming rays of the morning sun when Rex arose and looked out of his window. Below, in the streets, many people were already on their way to work although it was but seven o'clock. They passed in an intermittent stream along the pavements, or jammed the clattering trolleys that careened down the avenues. What consternation would reign in their hearts and minds when they learned of the important disclosures that would soon be broadcast. These were the citizens of Hilton, the voters whose choice would place some man at their head to guide the destiny of the city for the coming term. Rex warmed to the thought that this choice, now that the unusual difficulties had been surmounted, would be beyond doubt . . . his father.

His mind ran over the harrowing experiences of the night before, and for the first time

he appreciated the fact that the victory had almost eluded him. If those men had evaded capture the weight of his other evidence would not have been sufficient to convince the police, and what was more, the opinion of the voting public. He imagined Heeney, his father's rival, gloating over his certain triumph. Well, Mr. Heeney would be singing a different song before long. It would be more like a funeral dirge than a hymn of victory, of that Rex was sure.

Absently he donned his clothes, wincing now and then as the bruises acquired last night bore active testimony to the fall from the car and the subsequent battle in the road. An older man would have been unable to move but Rex's training on the football field and elsewhere stood him in good stead. He limbered up his arms and legs with a few preparatory exercises, and then hurried downstairs for breakfast.

The Mayor was still abed, and Rex sat down to a silent meal served by the obsequious Strewth. Rex regarded the old butler, whose face had seemed to remain absolutely changeless as long as the boy could remember. Strewth seemed more like a waxen image than

a human being. Rex recalled that his father had brought the man back with him from London many years before, and recalled, too, the story he used to tell about how he had stolen the servant from his dear friend MacAndrews, an official in the famed British Intelligence Service. It was odd that Rex should think of all this now but perhaps it was a brief premonition of the future, a glimpse into things yet to come. The fact that Strewth had served a man of MacAndrews' nature had always impressed Rex, interested as he was in the business of crime detection. He often wondered what stories Strewth might have been able to tell about his former master's exploits, but the old man had never consented to reveal a thing. He seldom spoke, and then only in the course of his duties.

Rex dallied with his breakfast, too thrilled to eat of the plentiful fare that the butler set before him. His thoughts raced ahead to the meeting that was to take place a few hours hence. Would he be calm enough to go through with the whole proceedings? He fervently hoped that his youth would not be a hindrance.

Somehow he switched his mind from the events yet to be unfolded and concentrated

upon some fried eggs, bacon, and a cup of coffee. To go without food would only make him more nervous. He drained his coffee cup and left the table, hurrying into the hall where he found his hat and overcoat. In a moment he had flung into them, and was running back to the garage for his roadster. There were still a few things to be attended to at Hallowell's house, and he wanted to be there early.

On the way over he thought of Butterball and the fat lad's all-night vigil. He had called the boy's family and said that their son was staying with him for the night. He wondered what they would have said had they known that the pride and joy of their household was keeping a watchful eye upon a couple of desperate villains lodged in a cellar storeroom. Probably they would have raised the roof but secretly would have been proud enough. The Mayor, of course, knew nothing of the exciting happenings of the previous twelve hours. He had been asleep when Rex returned.

Rex's knock on the Sergeant's front door was answered by a sleepy eyed, tousled Butterball.

"The Sergeant is downstairs," he told his

chum, "and I've been trying to get a little sleep on the sofa. I guess I didn't try hard enough because I haven't slept a wink."

"You can go home now and hit the hay," Rex said, but the fat boy refused.

"I'm going to be in on the finish of this thing," he avowed. "The city editor would kill me if he found out that someone else on another paper got this story before he did. My job is risky enough, considering the fact that I haven't even spoken to him during the past two days."

Rex laughed. "Have it your way," he said. "And I don't blame you."

He left the living room, and was soon down in the cellar talking to Hallowell. From the storeroom came a series of thunderous snores. Evidently the prisoners had succumbed to sleep.

"Listen to them," the Sergeant said. "You'd think they had nothing to worry them. Maybe a nice, long stretch in Joliet is their idea of a holiday."

Then they became absorbed in a lengthy conversation concerning the plans for the morning. To hear them would have amazed any theatrical stage manager. They were

scheming to make a regular show of the proceedings.

"Surprise, that's what we want," Rex had said. "We want to sweep them off their feet before they are aware of what's happening. That's the psychology of the situation. If we can force an immediate confession it will save a lot of time."

"But who's going to confess?" the Sergeant had asked with a puzzled frown knitting his brows. "I know where we were last night but I can't figure out the mess at all. I'm so confused I'm liable to confess myself."

Rex finally convinced the older man that everything would be cleared up in due time. He added that the Sergeant better prepare for a flood of applause from the populace at large for he didn't want his name connected with the capture. The principals in the case would have to know, that was evident, but so far as the public was concerned he'd rather remain out of it. Then, should anything else come up where he might be of use, he'd be able to operate as an unknown.

Hallowell protested but the boy was firm. "I nearly botched the whole thing," he said. "And that would have cost you your job."

Without you we would have been lost anyway."

In the end the Sergeant acquiesced, and Rex explained the final elements in the plan.

"I think that if we spring these fellows," he said, waving a hand toward the closed store room door, "at ten-thirty the effect will be perfect. By that time everyone there will be keyed up and wondering what's going to happen next. We'll have to have the convicts-to-be under guard because they are probably sore enough to make an attempt to reach their employer. All we want is the effect of their presence. No fireworks.

"Dad will have a stenographer hidden near by to take down everything that's said," he continued, "which will mean a carefully kept record for use in court. Beyond these arrangements as there is little else to do, I think I'll go up and talk to Butt now." Suiting the action to the word, he leaped up the stairs and entered the living room. Butterball was seated on the sofa with a pad in his lap and a pencil in his hand. A faraway look in his eyes betokened deep thought. Abruptly he bent his head over the pad and began to scribble.

"What's that?" Rex asked as he entered.

"This is going to be the story heard round the world," Butterball answered. "I'm writing as much as possible now using the marvelous imagination for which I am famed. There won't be much difference between what I've got here and what will take place at your dad's office. Then I'll only have to brush it up and shoot it in to the editor. That means plenty of sleep for the well known Mr. Thomas this afternoon."

"The story ought to read like a book," Rex suggested. "There's been enough adventure for at least one book or maybe two. You should have been with me on that auto ride last night. I was scared stiff, and if it hadn't been for luck those men downstairs would have gotten away. Even so I think they would have been picked up farther on, in the next city perhaps."

"You're too modest, Rex," his chum said. "I'm going to write an article about you that will have the community parading to your door with gifts of frankincense and myrrh."

"Not on your life," Rex hastened to say. "Don't you so much as mention my name. It

isn't modesty at all. It's simply that I'd be better off in case of any trouble in the future. This investigation business is the greatest thing in my life, I expect, and I want to stick to it. The less that the people know about my part in it the easier it will be for me, and you, too."

"Gosh," Butterball murmured. "And I was going to make you out a civic benefit, someone for the Ladies' Auxiliary to have at their socials and such. Think of what you'll miss. But I suppose you're right. Any way, when you're rich and famous you can look back and say: 'Oh, yes, I was the chap who caught the Hilton robbers back in nineteen-thirty.'"

"Stop kidding me, you big balloon," Rex pleaded. "You know as well as I do that you're as much to blame as I am for the success of this affair."

Butterball blushed to the roots of his hair, and resumed scribbling. He knew that praise from Rex was a thing to be valued. His friend was a real square shooter.

While the "man mountain" continued to write, Rex described to him the arrangements

that he and Hallowell had made for the ensuing meeting. "It ought to work like a charm, Butt," he concluded.

"You know, we ought to start a detective agency," Butterball looked up to say. "With your brains and the weight I could lend to the business we'd be a howling success. All we would need would be a flock of false whiskers, some dark eyeglasses, a couple of tin badges, handcuffs, and a water pistol or two. Of course you would have to wear a double peaked shooting cap and hang a calabash pipe in your mouth."

"What would you wear?" Rex asked, joining in the fun.

"I guess all I'd have to do would be to dress in that ballet costume. Then while the crooks were laughing themselves sick you could walk up and slip the cuffs on them."

Both rocked with laughter, and the Sergeant, waiting downstairs, shook his head. "You'd think to hear those two boys neither had a care in the world," he chuckled to himself. In a moment he heard Rex go to the phone and call the station house at which Patrolman Rooney could be found. The burly Irishman was brought to the phone, and Rex

instructed him to join them at Hallowell's home. "Bring another man with you," he added, "and tell the desk sergeant that the orders are from Jim Hallowell." He hung up and went to inform the Sergeant that relief would be there shortly.

Rooney and another officer named Henderson arrived in jig time, and the three leaders in the plot were enabled to rest until it was close to the time set by the Mayor for his gathering in the City Hall.

They sat about in the living room, discussing the case in general and last night in particular. Hallowell explained that after Rex had been carried away as he clung to the back of the car, he and Thomas had been at a loss as to what they should do. It would have been impossible to obtain a pursuit car in sufficient time to pick up the trail. They had returned to Rex's roadster and driven to the house where Rex had found them later. There the Sergeant had sent telegrams or long distance phone messages to every city and town within a radius of one hundred miles. After that they had nothing to do but wait. "We were worried sick," the Sergeant said, "but we had the feeling that you'd come through O.K."

Presently Rex noted the time, and suggested that they leave for the office. Hallowell went downstairs to the policemen who had taken charge of the two prisoners and instructed them just when they were to appear at City Hall. "And keep 'em handcuffed to you," he cautioned. Shortly the three were driving towards City Hall, even Hallowell suppressing the excitement that dominated his every thought. The boys had thrown off the humorous attitude that had cloaked them before, and in all three faces there was a grimness that mirrored the tenseness of their nerves.

The Mayor had arrived at his office earlier in the morning and he greeted them warmly. None of the invited "guests" had made an appearance as yet so that the four seated themselves comfortably and chatted animatedly. The Mayor still professed his ignorance as to what the boys had in view but promised to hold his curiosity in check until the meeting had disclosed the answer to his question.

Promptly on the stroke of ten the first "victim" arrived. It was John P. Roberts, a man of great age and venerable bearing. He had been one of the first to be robbed but was ignorant, naturally, that he had been called be-

cause of his loss. The Mayor explained to him that there were others to come before the subject for discussion would be broached. The old gentleman took the chair proffered him and joined in an animated conversation about the weather and other topics of like importance. It was not long before two more arrived, Messrs. Boyden and Mellon, who seemed surprised at the size of the gathering. Boyden has already been described, and his companion was more or less of the same type. Tall and distinguished looking, he was a man to be respected and, perhaps, feared. The thieves had broken into his home and purloined the famous Mellon Sapphire, a gem of great size and perfectly "starred." It had been brought back from India many years before, and had been the envy of many a Hilton matron.

In a few moments all of the victims had been assembled in chairs about the Mayor's desk. Messrs. Tierney, Leeds, Starett, Bauer, Wilson, and Benson had been the last to arrive, and had expressed surprise upon seeing so many of their friends in the room. Like the first three, they were all men of means and bore the stamp of importance. Most of the

heads were gray or graying, and in most of the faces were seen heralds of approaching old age. Roberts was the only one of them who was really old, while Wilson alone could be termed young. Not a gray hair showed on his head, and few wrinkles creased his face. Rex noted that he was the only one who seemed the least bit nervous after he had seen the gathering in the office.

Hallowell had taken up a stand behind the Mayor's chair, while Rex was seated at his father's right. Butterball had placed his chair away out of the circle and close to the window. A notebook rested in his lap, and he idly fingered a sharpened pencil that protruded from his vest pocket. For all the world the scene resembled a directors' meeting of some large corporation. But the thoughts that occupied the minds of those present were very confused. Most of the men who had appeared at the Mayor's request believed that something political was in the air, and consequently felt ill at ease. They were all aware of the Mayor's predicament, and though he was a friend and intimate of most of them, they had been convinced that a change in the city's administration was imminent. They

silently hoped that nothing embarrassing would be forthcoming. How could they know that the reason for this conference was concerned with the crime wave that had caused each one there to suffer. None of them seemed to notice that the group comprised all of those who had been robbed.

Rex was covertly watching the faces of these men. Two of them, he knew now, were guilty of a tremendous social as well as statutory crime. He scanned their faces, and found it difficult to believe what he had learned to be the truth.

But now the Mayor had arisen and was addressing the group.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I must confess to a slight ruse in order to bring you to this office this morning. From my conversation with each one of you last night, you gathered, no doubt, that this meeting was connected with some civic affair. Although it is, in a sense, a civic problem that we are to discuss, it is in a larger sense a personal one.

"Nor is it," he continued, noting the look of apprehension that lingered on each face, "a political question which I am to place before you. To be brief, the purpose of this gather-

ing is to illuminate, if possible, the darkness that has shrouded the crimes which have taken their toll of each one of you. As you are well aware, the efforts of our police have hitherto failed to reveal the thieves responsible for your losses. Now we have some new evidence that tends to brighten the whole situation.

“Should this evidence prove satisfactory, and result in the clearing up of the mystery, and the return of the stolen property, it will help to remove a blot from our city that has threatened to disrupt the administration. I am not thinking of my own part in that administration but of the entire guiding body of this city.”

There was a certain restlessness exhibited among the listeners. This was an unexpected turn of affairs. The Mayor allowed a moment for the force of his words to penetrate, and then continued.

“I mentioned some new evidence, and I must tell you that I am as ignorant of the nature of that evidence as are you. Whatever facts have been uncovered are the direct result of the investigations of Sergeant Hallowell,” he motioned to the Sergeant who stood behind him, “and two youths who took it upon them-

selves to lend material aid . . . Mr. Horace Thomas and my son, Rex."

The gentlemen looked with astonishment at Rex, and then at Butterball who was now gazing out of the window.

The Mayor smiled, and then concluded his speech.

"As I've told you, I know nothing of the information about to be furnished you, and so I am yielding the floor to my son whom I hope will be able to explain his actions."

He resumed his seat, observing the doubt, astonishment, and curiosity that was evident in every face. They seemed to question, judging from the glances that passed between them, the right of a mere boy to carry on this intensely dramatic meeting. Before Rex had arisen, Mr. Wilson shot a question at the Mayor.

"Your honor, I would like to know why this hasn't been handled by ordinary methods, and why nothing in regard to it has appeared in the papers?"

The Mayor looked disgruntled but before he could speak Rex had turned to answer Mr. Wilson.

"That will be apparent soon enough," he

said with conviction, "and I'm certain that no one will blame us for keeping quiet.

"I know," he went on, fearing other interruptions, "that it seems to be an imposition on my part to expect you gentlemen to listen to me. But if you'll give me a chance, I'll prove to your complete satisfaction that my news is of utmost importance." He paused and glanced at his watch. Ten twenty-five. He had to work fast, although he was frightened. It was pretty hard to get up and talk this way to a group of men twice his age, or older.

"To begin with," he said, "I would have you understand that we attacked this problem of the mysterious threats from an angle that differed widely from that held by the police. We called our viewpoint a 'hunch,' because it was pure theory, although based on what seemed to be a logical interpretation of the facts. The theory goes back to a time when the first seven thefts had been perpetrated, and when Hilton believed itself to be in the midst of a crime wave. The crime wave was a reality, I'll admit, but we saw in it a plot that meant more than the mere outward indications which were the thefts. The system which my father had built up in Hilton had

wiped out crime. No one would have dared to attempt these robberies unless they were in possession of certain facts that made crime a simple and easily covered up expedient. The fact that crimes occurred solely in the homes of you wealthy citizens seemed to establish a reasonable belief as to the type of person most likely to be at the bottom of the plot, and that in turn pointed the way to the real reason behind the crime wave—an obvious attempt to discredit the Mayor's office."

He paused momentarily, and then rushed on, all uneasiness having vanished from his speech.

"In other words, some powerful Hiltonian, for some reason best known to him, probably financial, was out to run my dad from office.

"That, gentlemen," he cried, "was our 'hunch' and we have built up evidence to support it. Who the man, or rather men, are who wanted to create this blot upon dad's régime you will soon know. Why they wished to do this will also be brought to light in the course of this meeting.

"Now," he continued, "it is safe to say that the motive in each case of theft was the same. The villains in the plot were counting on the

effect of this crime wave to mould public opinion against the administration. Their only weakness lay in the possibility of someone discovering that motive, and as this seemed improbable they went right ahead with their plans. Remember that effect was the motive.

"The climax of the scheme came with the robbery of Mr. Boyden's home, a home fully protected by burglar alarms. The effect of this was tremendous, but it also proved to Butterball and me that our 'hunch' was correct for the man who planned that robbery betrayed his intimate knowledge of the Boyden household even as to the presence of the jewels in the wall safe.

"Taking the Boyden affair as a climax purposely arranged, we figured that the last straw or anticlimax, would be a daring robbery of great size in the home of some wealthy man while that man was present in his home or better still, surrounded by guests. This would prove the strength of the criminals and make the Mayor's defeat a certainty. At the same time, Heeney was secretly collecting votes and getting a foothold on the political ladder. He must have had financial aid from some source.

"Because we were following this line of rea-

soning, we were prepared for the Bauer escape. When the theft of the necklace took place, we saw the crook and chased him across the lawns. I was too late to catch him but we found something that he had lost in his flight. It was a map or diagram that someone had given him which showed where he and his companion were to stay while they were in the vicinity of Hilton. Their employer had taken every care that they be safely hidden in a place far enough away to be above suspicion.

“To sum up, gentlemen, this phase of the case, we can safely say that the robberies in Hilton were part of a political plot, that the thieves were hired by prominent persons within the city, and that our duty is to prove the truth of the first two premises.”

Again he paused, and this time the gentlemanly Roberts had risen from his seat. His face was almost apoplectic. “I demand to know,” he shouted, “what possible proof there can be to this cock-and-bull story?”

Rex had been waiting for this inevitable question.

“Rooney,” he called, and pointed to the door behind them. Everyone had turned in their seats to see what was happening. Even

before the door had opened all the way, a bel-
low of rage could be heard from beyond.

"There he is, the dirty double crosser!"

William (Bub) Freeman stood shakily in the doorway, a white bandage streaked with red wrapped about his head, and making his features more ferocious than ever. The glint of steel at his wrist showed that someone behind him had hold of him, else he might have been bursting into the room. But the thing that startled the men in that room more than this strange creature's appearance was the fact that one gross arm was outstretched, and one pudgy finger was pointed full at—Silas Boyden.

Before anyone had a chance to speak or move, another bandaged head had been thrust beneath the huge crook's armpit. It leered menacingly, and the beady eyes fastened on another man in the room.

"Yeh," Shifty Lee cried, "an' there's that Dutchman who framed us last night." He indicated . . . Wilhelm Bauer.

Not another sound could be heard in the room as Rex motioned to have the door closed. He looked down at the white faces before him.

"You have seen and heard, gentlemen," he

said quietly. Every eye was fixed upon Boyden and Bauer. It was plain that the excitement had rendered every one speechless. The Mayor was staring with his mouth agape. Hallowell likewise seemed stunned. Boyden and Bauer were pale, though contained. They did not look like guilty men. It was Tierney who broke the silence.

"Your honor, this is an outrage. It is worse than an outrage, it is downright libel. Are we men, all of us solid, industrious members of this community expected to believe an accusation as ridiculous as this one."

Both Boyden and Bauer smiled, as if to indicate that they were thoroughly in accord with Mr. Tierney's view. That gentleman continued.

"How are we to know that this is not a cheap scheme to fasten the blame on an innocent party?" he asked. "There must be more proof than the mere appearance of those two thugs. Mr. Boyden and Mr. Bauer are respected and honored gentlemen. The fact that they have preferred to remain silent during this farcical procedure is sufficient indication that they are content to laugh off the statement of a harebrained boy."

He sat down and glared scathingly at Rex who only smiled.

"I have said nothing of proof," he assured the group, "for that rightly belongs to the second part of the story. You are all too startled to realize that no one would be fool enough to let this drama run its course unless there was enough proof to satisfy those who doubted the accusation. I have the necessary facts, more than I need, and I'm sure that Mr. Boyden and Mr. Bauer are convinced that this is no laughing matter." He pointed to the two who were moving restlessly in their chairs.

"They know that the jig is up," he added, "because they know what was found on those two hirelings of theirs. Don't you?" This last came like a bullet. Boyden remained motionless but Bauer was visibly affected. The German was perspiring freely by now, and he mopped his face as he rose to his feet. Before addressing the men about him he turned to Boyden:

"Silas," he said, "the boy is right . . . we are lost. . . . I told you this business was no good . . . we have been found out . . . now . . . now we must suffer." Boyden snarled,

"You fool, you utter, utter fool," but Bauer silenced him.

"No, I am no fool. You are the real fool for ever having begun this troublesome life of crime. Yes, gentlemen," he said directing his remarks to the gaping faces seated in that fateful circle, "this man is to blame. I am not trying to save myself for I did my share in this filthy scheme but it was he, he alone, who originated the idea and who talked me into helping him."

"But I don't understand," broke in Mr. Benson. "Why did you allow this to happen? A man of your wealth and position had no need to associate himself with a plot that was criminal and unsocial."

"I am not the man of wealth and position that you believe me to be."

The others stared at him, unable to grasp the meaning of this cryptic statement. Bauer continued:

"I am no longer a rich man, in fact I am less than poor, and he . . . he was the only one whom I told. When I lost my fortune, I was ashamed and went to him. He lent me money, and then lost all of his own the same way I had . . . gambling in speculative enter-

prises. Then it was that he came to me with this scheme. We would gain control of city politics, install Heeney as Mayor, put straw men in the Board of Aldermen, and sit back to reap the benefits. I am a contractor; city contracts would be mine. He would control the board and approve any padded items in the budget that were necessary to give him a good living. Gradually we would recoup our lost fortunes, trusting to public opinion to acclaim us as community benefactors. What do the voters know of the things that go on in the administration? That is how we figured. But now it's over, and I'm glad. I am willing to be punished . . . but there is my daughter, what will become of her?" Tears were streaming down the man's face. Hardly a man in the room could fail to feel some twinge of sympathy for this poor fellow.

It was Boyden's turn to speak. While Bauer had been confessing, he had remained stolidly in his chair, staring out straight in front with brooding, unseeing eyes. When his confederate had ceased, he rose to his feet, and stood facing his auditors with a peculiar expression upon his features. There was something majestic about the man despite his

ruined reputation. Those steel gray eyes flashed over the faces turned toward him as though he was considering the justice that he might expect from each one. At length his deep voice boomed out, almost imperiously.

"You've heard what my white livered friend has said and I have nothing else to offer. His story is substantially true. He has expressed his willingness to be punished, and I . . . will not be punished."

As he had bitten out these last words his hand moved toward his hip. Even as he moved, Rex had flung his body upon the man. They fell to the floor and there was a brief tussle. Then Rex arose, holding in his hand something that shone blue in the sunlight that streamed through the window.

"I imagined that he would try to kill himself," Rex explained. "You see, he knew that we were wise to his game last night but thought that if his thugs got away we would be unable to build up a strong enough case. The first thing I noticed when he came in was that bulge on his hip."

Hallowell called in Rooney and another policeman and the two conspirators were led away. The others remained to congratulate

the Mayor, as well as Hallowell and the two boys.

"I'm terribly sorry for the way I attacked you, young man," said Mr. Tierney. "But . . . well . . . you know, under the circumstances, it did seem rather a tall story. I've got to hand it to you, though, that was a neat job." He shook Rex's hand and left, followed by the remaining members of the group. They all seemed a bit dazed from the dénouement that the morning's meeting had produced.

Butterball had been busy with his scribbling. Now he rushed over to the Mayor, took down a brief statement from that official, and then tore out to greet his editor with the biggest "scoop" of the year! He had been the only reporter present, and perhaps he wasn't a happy lad.

Finally Rex and his father were alone for a moment.

"Well, Dad," the boy said, "it's all over but the shouting. Are you glad?"

The Mayor could not speak. Tears brimmed in his eyes, not for the problem solved but for the boy who had stood up like a man and swung what had seemed an impossible weight

clear above his head. "Not so glad, son," he managed to say, "as proud . . . of you."

The boy was embarrassed. He tried to tell his father that it was as much Butterball Thomas' victory as his own. Why should he get all the credit?

"We'll forget about credit and everything, Rex, for a while anyway. You know that in court the prosecution will have to present all its evidence despite the confessions of those men. Go home and take a rest, and tonight you can tell us the facts and theories that led to this final scene. You spoke of plenty of evidence. That means clues, and I want to hear it all."

Rex left after that but rest was impossible. He was too busy arranging his bits of glass and tobacco and such into a neat pattern or mosaic. What a help they had been. And wait until old Jim Hallowell heard the story that they would tell.

CHAPTER XVI

THE EXPLANATION

THAT evening, following a dinner of considerable excellence spiced with an air of good humor and camaraderie, the four men most concerned with the foregoing events gathered in the library of "King Cole's Castle." Mayor Cole, looking for all the world like an elderly god in evening clothes, seated himself in his favorite chair and lighted a mild and fragrant cigar. Rex, Butterball, and Sergeant Jim Hallowell drew up comfortable chairs close to the Mayor's and prepared to listen to Rex's story.

To the casual eye there was nothing unusual in the appearance of any one in the room. No indication of the ordeal recently experienced could be noticed in the handsome, clean cut, healthy features of young Rex. The few hours of mental ease had erased all traces of the strain and fatigue which had been present in the morning. He leaned back in his chair and

ran his fingers idly through the crisp chestnut hair that crowned his head. Butterball's pudgy features, too, seemed relaxed and calm as he sat quietly, his two hundred pound frame overflowing from the seat he had chosen. His story had electrified the city. It had driven his editor into a frenzy of flowery praise . . . and the promise of a substantial increase in salary. The big boy was happy, and how!

As for Hallowell, he seemed still in a daze. The shock of the boy's revelation had been lasting, but even more potent was the great ovation that had greeted him after the news was out. Hallowell, and his subordinates, had received full credit for the miraculous capture. The papers had hailed him as a true hero, and he had been forced to submit to all the special tortures that accompany popular acclaim. Photographers, reporters, delegations, and such had hounded his tracks all the day. As he had said at dinner time, the only thing they didn't want him to do was to stand on his head on the City Hall tower. He felt guilty enough, having to accept all this praise but Rex had begged him to do so. He was anxious to hear the details of the boy's deduc-

tions, consequently he was the first to speak.

"Tell me, lad," he said with a smile, "just how I managed to accomplish this great thing. After all, I'm entitled to a fair description of the workings of my 'brilliant, analytical mind' as the papers called it."

The others joined in the hearty laugh that followed this naïve remark. Butterball, in his mirth, knocked over the Mayor's ash receiver which, fortunately, was unbreakable. "True to form," Hallowell said, as the ever meticulous lad was bending down to scoop up the fallen ashes. After the receiver was once more standing upright, the Mayor spoke gently to his son.

"We're all waiting for the explanation, son. Let's hear it before this vandal does any more damage."

"There isn't an awful lot to tell," Rex began, "although nothing came out at the meeting this morning save the confessions. We didn't think that Bauer would break down so soon, and we were prepared to haul out our whole case. In a way we were lucky, because I might have become mixed up in my data. What there is of it I'll tell you, and from it,

you and the district attorney can round out the necessary brief."

He arose from his seat and vanished from the room for a moment, returning with a few odd objects that he held carefully in his hand.

"First of all," he said, "there is this cigar butt. I found it outside Boyden's library window and showed it to the Sergeant at the time. He saw nothing in it, and I didn't either but I kept it anyway. It was Butterball who uncovered its significance, for he noticed that it was dry and therefore must have been thrown from the window after the rain. Tobacco, especially in this form, does not dry out rapidly. Thus it was necessary to find out just when it had been smoked and discarded. Werthan, the butler, said that Mr. Boyden was not much of a smoker. He told me yesterday that his master never smoked in the morning while at home, and he is positive that there was no cigar smoked that particular morning. That meant that the smoking had been done between two A.M. and breakfast time. I felt sure after Butt here had explained to me about the dryness of it, that Boyden was the smoker. It isn't logical to say that the thief who had

blown the safe took time to smoke a cigar. Therefore . . . Boyden.

“But there was something else that made me believe in his guilt even before the cigar was explained. I found these directly under the window where Smith had missed them.”

He exhibited the tiny, pie shaped fragments of glass.

“I couldn’t figure these out until I remembered that Boyden had sent his negro boy down to the jewelers that morning. I had stopped the boy, and he showed me a wrist watch that was to be repaired. Then I found the glass, and it struck me that the pieces might have been part of a watch crystal that had been smashed on the window sill above. I remembered that Boyden wore his watch on the left wrist, face down. Werthan can testify to this, too, for it was an invariable custom of Mr. Boyden. What made me notice the fact was simply that I wear my watch the same way. Boyden had glanced at his watch many times (he had another watch on then) and he moved his arm just as I do or as anyone else does who wears a wrist watch in this manner.

“The shape of the glass bits was exactly like that of a broken watch crystal. There was

left for me to discover right then and there how that glass had fallen below the window. It flashed upon me that if someone were to reach out of the window to help lift another person into the room, the weight of the other person might tend to force the arm down on the casement, and if a watch was on the underside of the wrist the crystal might be crushed. One thing more was necessary, but I wasn't in a hurry to find that out, for by then I was sure that Boyden had robbed himself and that he was the man behind all the other robberies. That one thing was the time that crystal had been smashed. I had kept these crystal clues to myself, and later, under pretext of returning for my gloves, I phoned the jeweler and asked him to make an accurate description of that watch just as it came to the shop. That description is here." He drew a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"It says that the hands of the watch had been damaged but that the hour hand pointed to two o'clock. The watch must have been broken shortly after two. Yesterday I questioned Werthan about something that had slipped my mind before. I had forgotten that the watch might have been broken in the after-

noon or on some other day. However, Werthan cleared that up by calling Rastus, the colored boy, who, in turn, said that Mr. Boyden, when he gave him the watch, had said distinctly that he had broken it during the night. Thus he practically convicted himself but could not have expected that the broken watch would ever have any significance."

Rex paused long enough to let this diagnosis sink in, and then continued.

"After I had been convinced that Boyden had assisted one of the crooks to enter his home, I began to see several faults in his plans. There was the fact that no one could have evaded that alarm, unless it was opened by throwing the switch within. Had the switch been open in the morning, there might have been some doubt in my mind but Boyden had closed it and when you think about it, he was the only one in the house who could have done it except the servants. And that made me think, too, that the reason the switch had been closed after the safe was opened was that Boyden feared his man would double-cross him and return to take the jewels which were still in the safe.

“The whole train of thought that the finding of those bits of glass inspired was now simple and connected. Boyden had flipped his cigar out of the window as a signal, helped the waiting crook into the room and watched while the safe was blown; then he had closed the burglar alarm after the cracksman left. He will probably be willing to tell you where he hid the jewels supposedly stolen, for Sergeant Hallowell will tell you that they were not in the box found at the mill.”

Again Rex paused, and the Mayor spoke:

“I see it all now. He was the fellow who had entrée to every one of the homes that were robbed, and it was easy for him to tell his thieves when to act, and where.”

Rex nodded. “I checked up that point yesterday, too. Either Boyden, Bauer or both, were with the people who were robbed at the very time that the thefts were taking place. He had only to inform his men when these homes would be empty, and where the valuables were located. He knew that they would be uninterrupted, for the owners were certain to be out of the houses. An ordinary crook could not get possession of this information,

and might have been caught long before. That was what gave us our 'hunch' in the first place . . . the robberies were too smooth.

"Now," he continued, "take the Bauer affair. Besides the fact that the masquerade was an unexpected event, as Bauer had not entertained for so long, it was peculiar that the thief had been able to pick out Ilsa Bauer immediately after the lights went out. None of us had an inkling as to which one of the maskers she was, and that made me realize that whoever had taken the necklace had been told beforehand the costume that Ilsa was to wear. Furthermore it seemed odd that she should have been given a valuable necklace at that time, for there was no reason for her wearing it at the masked ball. It wouldn't have looked any different than the tons of costume jewelry that was worn that night. The truth of it is, as Hallowell can also tell you, the necklace had no value at all. It was paste.

"We considered this peculiar theft from all angles, and it appeared to me that Bauer must have been in on the scheme because otherwise the thing would never have taken place in his house. The whole affair was too obviously a

frame-up. Thus we knew that the two of them—Boyden and Bauer—were working together.

“Of course we located the actual thieves from that piece of paper. Last night they escaped and we nearly lost them but when we did find them they had on their persons two thousand dollars in large bills. When these are traced, it will show who gave them the money . . . again Boyden and Bauer.”

The Mayor gasped. He had not heard of this part of the escapade. Now he demanded to know what had taken place.

“Well, they escaped from the mill, and I figured that they would come to Boyden for help. That was the natural thing to do. So I took the Sergeant and Butterball around to Boyden’s garage, but they weren’t there. That meant Bauer’s, and we got there just in time to catch them leaving in Bauer’s car. The Sergeant thought they were stealing it but I knew better. At any rate we caught them.” He winked at Hallowell who said nothing of the desperate fight that Rex had been a party to before those men had been safely locked up in the cellar.

"The whole thing sounds like a fairy tale to me," the Mayor said. "But it proves that a 'hunch' may not be a bad thing at all."

"Brains," Hallowell said. "Brains is what does it. How would you like to take over my job, son." They all laughed at this.

"It was a special problem, and we had plenty of luck," Rex told them, "otherwise the Sergeant would have caught them long ago."

There was lots more forthcoming that night before the party adjourned for home and bed. Rex went over the evidence once more with Hallowell, brushing up his deductions, and outlining the course that the prosecution must take. From time to time he recalled minor incidents that had cropped up, and which he had overlooked in his first talk. At last the Sergeant was preparing to go, and as he struggled into his overcoat he asked Rex an odd question.

"Why do you think those fellows, Boyden and Bauer, showed up this morning. It seems to me that they must have known what was in the wind, and that they would have packed up and left the town."

"They didn't know we had recaptured Lee

and Freeman," Rex answered, and "they believed that without those two to bear witness they would be perfectly safe. At that, they expected to put up a bluff and trusted to a lack of evidence to nullify the case against them. They were in a tight corner, you see, and running away would have spoiled what little chance they had of succeeding in their scheme. The jewels we had but there was still a faint hope that they could push Heeney through to the election. Now it's all over and I'm thankful."

Hallowell left, soon followed by Butterball. Rex and his father remained alone in the library, talking far into the night. The Mayor was unable to take his eyes from the boy, so proud was he. And none could blame him. Rex had ousted the thoughts of a deadly crime wave from the minds of Hiltonian voters, and in doing so had paved the way for his father's re-election.

After several hours of quiet conversation, the two men were so sleepy that bed was the only solution. They parted in the hallway but the Mayor stood for some time gazing at the door which had closed behind his son. Then he entered his own room a happy man.

CHAPTER XVII

A LETTER FROM ENGLAND

It was mid-December. Hilton lay serene and peaceful beneath its ermine mantle. Every home, church, and public building seemed all the more beautiful for the sparkling, powdery snow that silvered the roofs and clung in graceful drifts to door and window sills. Etched on every pane appeared a design of miraculous perfection, the artistry of Nature at her best. Even the grim, gaunt tower of City Hall was crested with a gleaming spear head that shone golden in the light of the sun.

Within City Hall all was as it should be. In his office Mayor Cole, looking as young and active as a man of his age could possibly look, stood gazing out of the window upon the silent, snow swept city that he loved. His thoughts wandered to two men who must miss all the glory of this beautiful day—two men who could not even view the clean, healthful

loveliness of winter ridden Illinois. Bauer and Boyden, repenting behind the grim, heartless walls of Joliet, cut off from all decent association, laboring in some prison shop, eating prison food, sleeping on hard iron cots. Not a pleasant picture but one to make a man think.

He thought, too, of Mrs. Boyden's tragic acceptance of her husband's fate, and of Elsa Bauer, eating her heart out in some distant boarding school to which the Mayor had sent her out of pure kindness—footing the bills himself until her father should be a free man and able to take up his parental duties once more. Each man had been sentenced to a minimum of three years, though the Mayor had used his every power to have this term reduced.

Then he turned to regard his son, bent over an enormous sheaf of notes from which he was abstracting the significant details. It was the court record of the famous trial, and Rex was preparing a summary to be entered in his own scrap book of crime data. His father was able to study him without the boy's being aware of it, and the old man smiled the self-satisfied smile of one who has seen his fond, loving

labors completely justified. Rex was a lad of whom any father might be proud.

As the boy plodded through the papers, the Mayor glanced down at a letter that he held in his hand, and as he scanned it's rambling phrases again, he laughed inwardly at his recollection of the man who had written it.

My dear Cole (the letter read), I was delighted to learn of your political triumph, and to hear of the remarkable exploits of that amazing son of yours. The whole thing read like a docket from our own dusty files over here in Scotland Yard, and I doubt if we have ever accomplished more than did those two rummy lads. It made me think of our own youth, and the huge times that we used to have during your all too brief visits to London. Even in those early days we were both frightfully keen on this sort of thing although I'll confess that you were always a bit deep for me. It seems strange that I should now be a jolly Sherlock, while you have entered the realm of politics, leaving the detective end to Rex, Jr. When last I saw the boy, he was only a chit and it never occurred to me that some day he would prove a really clever investigator.

I took it that he would turn to the law, as you did.

But if he is interested in study of criminal detection I should not discourage him, for it is a rare field for the scientific bloodhound. At any rate, give him a chance to prove to himself that he is on the right road. From what I read, he is gifted with unusual foresight and that is one of the basic qualifications for a detective. It simply amounts to the ability to hunt out the purpose of the crime, rather than the means. Once the objective is determined, the rest is simple.

I'm not attempting to write any brief for the criminal investigator, old fellow, but I am trying to lead up to a little plan that is working away in my mind.

Scotland Yard has recently been intrusted with a mission so delicate that I can not even hint at it in this letter. Suffice it to say, that within a few days I am to set sail for America en route to the Orient, and that I will be accompanied by a young man whom I must call John Smith, although that is not his name. As my trip shall take me across the continent, from New York to San Francisco, I am going to drop in upon you in Hilton and, I hope, take your son away from you for several months.

If you offer any objections to this abduction, I shall proceed to pound your fatherly bean, for it is an opportunity not to be lightly cast aside. The boy will travel in what is a most absorbing part of the world, and at the same time might be called upon to exhibit ingenuity that he must certainly possess. And I'm sure he'll like his companions, for although I am a dour old busybody, the young man of whom I made mention before is a fine chap and will be a real chum to Rex.

Don't bother to reply to me by post, as I shall be on my way before anything of that sort might reach me. Save your comments until I arrive in Hilton and then you may spout all you want. I'll arrive in New York on the tenth of January, but it will be a few weeks before I'll start for Hilton, and then another week before we leave for San Francisco. That ought to give me plenty of time to become chummy with your butler, Strewth, whom you so boldly stole from me just as he and I were becoming friendly. There is no man living who has so adequately fathomed the intricacies of an omelette aux fine herbes.

Well, old thing, until the middle of February, then.

Cheerio,
JOHN.

"The same old MacAndrews," mused the Mayor as he creased the letter and replaced it in its envelope. "The most impulsive man I ever knew, and one of the best."

He walked over to Rex, and placed his hand before the boy's eyes. Rex looked up questioningly.

"What is it, Dad?"

The Mayor stared down at him for a moment.

"How would you like to travel, son?" he asked.

"Why, of course I'd like to take a trip, just for a change, Dad. Where do you intend to go?"

"I'm not going at all, Rex, but I've just received this letter from John MacAndrews (you've heard me speak of him), and in it he suggests that you go along with him on some expedition or other that he's to make to the East. He's being sent on a diplomatic mission of some sort, although I can't understand why the British Government should choose a detective inspector for the job. Any way, he wants you to make the voyage, inasmuch as there is a mysterious young man going to be with him and he thinks you would be good

company for the boy. What do you think?"

Rex appeared thoughtful, and then spoke slowly:

"Gee, I'd like to go, all right, but I'd hate to leave you, and Butterball too."

The Mayor saw that the boy was struggling between two impulses.

"Don't you worry about me, young fellow, I'll get along without you all right for a few months. And we might be able to send Thomas with you. I hadn't thought of it before."

From the way Rex's eyes shone, it was evident that the prospect of a trip through the Orient was very alluring. It did not take Mayor Cole long to realize that the boy should go, and he knew that once Rex met interesting old John MacAndrews, the lad's determination would brook no obstacles. It would be a rare treat for Rex to travel with one of the most important members of that great organization, Scotland Yard. And he might learn a lot from the big-hearted Scotchman.

"We'll mull it over between now and the middle of March, son," he said, knowing full well that no further consideration was necessary. Had he surmised what was in store,

however, it is more than likely that he would have never mentioned the letter, and would have sent MacAndrews packing as soon as that gentleman set foot in Hilton. As it was, he stepped out of the office to inspect "Tillie, the Second," the new rubber plant that had been his gift to Joe, the janitor. MacAndrews was temporarily forgotten.

Rex, during his father's absence, neglected the records that lay before him. His mind was busy conjuring up weird pictures of Oriental mystery. None of them, we might add, were half so colorful as the events that later befell him.

THE END

REX COLE, JUNIOR, AND THE
GRINNING GHOST

THE huge ruby seemed almost alive as it glowed darkly in the light of the table lamp. Against the golden square of cloth that draped the table it resembled a great, gory drop of fresh blood, and those who gazed fascinated at it thought strangely of the tale of horror which Inspector MacAndrews had just related. Neither Rex nor Butterball, nor even the Mayor had ever seen a stone as large or as perfect as this lovely, if evil, gem. No wonder that native worshippers had called it the "Tear of Blood," for its shape was plausibly that of a gigantic tear-drop. Despite its beauty, each of the three who saw it for the first time, suppressed a shudder. How many lives had been sacrificed because of its irresistible lure! How many wild, half-crazy Hindu priests would kill, maim, and torture in order to restore it to the sacred image of Kal! It

was terrible to think of all this. MacAndrews broke the silence.

"There it is," he chuckled, "the blasted bit of rock that is the cause of our journey. Quite extraordinary, don't you think and worth all of three million pounds. Of course, if it were ever cut up, as it would have to be in order to be sold, it would suffer in value. But as it is there, it's the largest ruby in existence and consequently more valuable because of its tremendous size."

"I'm surprised that you can be so calm, John, with a thing like that on your person all the time," the Mayor said, unable to avert his eyes from the flashing jewel.

"I may not be as calm as I look," was the reply, "but I feel quite safe. No one save you gentlemen and one member of the British Foreign Office knows that the famous ruby has left the Royal Museum. Y'see, the reason they picked on me for this particular voyage was that I am more skilled in the art of concealing identity than any other man in the service of the King. I say that in all modesty." Then the lean, lank detective smiled. "You wouldn't have recognized me in New York, my dear Cole, nor would his own mother have

been able to identify Mr. er-er- 'Smith.' We took great pains at the outset of this adventure, and no one has yet discovered where we are. Of that I am certain. And, by Jove, I'm glad of that."

The others sympathized with him. If what he said was true, that a number of different forces had set their hearts upon retrieving that gem, there was every reason for him to be overjoyed that he had so far escaped detection.

"You didn't think it necessary to appear in Hilton in disguise, Inspector?" Rex then asked.

"No, we resumed our own selves a short distance from New York. I don't believe that anybody would bother searching for us in the very heart of the States. If they're looking any place, it would be in Canada."

For a few moments silence again shrouded the room. Even MacAndrews felt drawn to the ruby that continued to reflect in blood red rays the soft light of the table lamp. To Rex and the Mayor the oddity of the situation was peculiarly appealing. Here, under their humble roof in the small city of Hilton, rested the world's largest ruby. It was incredible,

unbelievable, startling beyond words. To Butterball it signified a tremendous item of genuine news value. A front page "scoop," if he could only use it. But his word must remain inviolate, for it might mean the loss of a human life were he to break his vow of silence. He, too, stared blankly at the ruby. What powerful magic this "Tear of Blood" exercised upon those who viewed it! And this quiet home setting made the spell still more potent. They continued to study the stone, and then . . . then the weird thing happened!

Every light in the room flashed out. Not a glimmer of light could be seen anywhere. The occupants of that spellbound chamber were too startled to move. Only MacAndrews made a motion toward the table. No one could see anyone else. They were petrified, frightened, speechless. Before that shock had been dissipated another one occurred. They could feel a faint breeze eddying through the room. Someone had opened the door? No sound could be heard save the forced breathing of the five in the room. Or were there six? Somehow the Inspector found his voice.

“What is it,” he cried. And suddenly, as if in answer, there materialized before their eyes a hideous, green . . .

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